

Plutarch's Morals
On the tranquillity of the mind

Translated by Matthew Morgan

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Allegory of Peace (c 1627) Simon Vouet, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome



Train of thought

- Plutarch salutes his friend Paccius.
- Worldly honor or wealth cannot procure quietness of mind.
- We should fortify ourselves against trouble.
- Tranquillity of mind not to be procured by neglect of public or private duty.
- Idleness is to many an affliction.
- Changes in life do not remove causes of disquiet.
- The mind itself renders life pleasant or otherwise.
- Make the best of our circumstances.
- Wise men derive benefit even from affliction.
- No trouble can arise, but good may come of it.
- Be not soured with the perverseness of others; nor fret at their failings.
- A consideration of the good we enjoy may help us bear our afflictions.
- Thus balancing one against the other.
- Consider what the loss would be of our present enjoyments.
- Cultivate a contented mind.
- The want of which creates suffering.
- Look at those worse off than ourselves.
- Every one has his particular trouble; therefore give no place to envy.
- Do not repine because some things are beyond your reach.
- Let every man know what he can do and be contented with doing it.
- Let alone what you are not capable of.
- It is wise to call to mind past enjoyment.
- Do not distress yourself by dwelling on past sorrows, nor give way to despondency of the future.
- Neither be too sanguine in your hopes.
- Afflictions come as a matter of necessity.
- Outward sufferings do not reach our nobler part, the mind.
- Death not a real, ultimate evil.
- The wise man may look down on things terrible to the vulgar.
- Guilt produces remorse.
- A clear conscience a rich possession.
- Life should be full of joy.
- That it is not to some is their own fault.



PLUTARCH WISHETH ALL HEALTH TO HIS PACCIUS.

1 It was late before I received your letter, wherein you make it your request that I would write something to you concerning the tranquillity of the mind, and of those things in the Timaeus which require a more perspicuous interpretation. At the same time a very urgent occasion called upon our common friend and companion Eros to sail directly to Rome; that which quickened him to a greater expedition was a dispatch he received from Fundanus, that best of men, who, as his custom is, always enjoins the making haste. Therefore, wanting full leisure to consummate those things justly which you requested, and being on the other side unwilling to send one from me to your dear self empty handed, I have transcribed my commonplace book, and hastily put together those collections which I had by me concerning this subject; for I thought you a man that did not look after flourishes of style and the affected elegance of language, but only required what was instructive in its nature and useful to us in the conduct of our lives. And I congratulate that bravery of temper in you, that though you are admitted into the confidence of princes, and have obtained so great a vogue of eloquence at the bar that no man hath exceeded you, you have not, like the tragic Merops, suffered yourself to be puffed up with the applause of the multitude, and transported beyond those bounds which are prescribed to our passions; but you call to mind that which you have so often heard, that a rich slipper will not cure the gout, a diamond ring a whitlow, nor will an imperial diadem ease the headache. For what advantage is there in honor, riches, or an interest at court, to remove all perturbations of mind and procure an equal tenor of life, if we do not use them with decency when they are present to our enjoyment, and if we are continually afflicted by their loss when we are deprived of them? And what is this but the province of reason, when the sensual part of us grows turbulent and makes excursions, to check its sallies and bring it again within the limits it hath transgressed, that it may not be carried away and so perverted with the gay appearances of things. For as Xenophon gives advice, we ought to remember the Gods and pay them particular devotions when our affairs are prosperous, that so when an exigency presseth us we may more confidently invoke them, now we have conciliated their favor and made them our friends. So wise men always ruminate upon those arguments which have any efficacy against the troubles of the mind before their calamities happen, that so the remedies being long prepared, they may acquire energy, and work with a more powerful operation. For as angry dogs are exasperated by every one's rating them, and are flattered to be quiet only by his voice to which they are accustomed; so it is not easy to pacify the brutish affections of the soul but by familiar reasons, and such as are used to be administered in such inward distempers.



2 Besides, he that affirmed that whosoever would enjoy tranquillity of mind must disengage himself from all private and public concerns, would make us pay dear for our tranquillity by buying it with idleness; as if he should prescribe thus to a sick man:

Lie still, poor wretch, and keep thy bed.¹

Now stupefaction is a bad remedy for desperate pain in the body, and verily he would be no better physician for the soul who should order idleness, softness, and neglect of friends, kinsfolk, and country, in order to remove its trouble and grief. It is likewise a false position that those live most contentedly who have the least to do; for then by this rule women should be of more sedate dispositions than men, since they only sit at home and mind their domestic affairs. Whereas in fact, as Hesiod expresseth it, —

The virgins' tender limbs are kept from cold;
Not the least wind to touch them is so bold;²

but nevertheless we see that grief and troubles and discontentments, arising from jealousy or superstition or vain opinions, flow as it were with a torrent into the apartments of the females. And though Laertes lived twenty years in the fields secluded from the world, and

Only a toothless hag did make his bed,
Draw him his drink, and did his table spread,³

though he forsook his house and country, and fled from a kingdom, yet grief with his sloth and sadness still kept him company. There are some to whom idleness hath been an affliction; as for instance, —

But raging still, amidst his navy sat
The stern Achilles, steadfast in his hate;
Nor mix'd in combat, nor in council join'd;
But wasting cares lay heavy on his mind:
In his black thoughts revenge and slaughter roll,
And scenes of blood rise dreadful in his soul.⁴

And he himself complains of it, being mightily disturbed, after this manner: —

I live an idle burden to the ground.⁵

Hence it is that Epicurus adviseth those who aspire to glory not to stagnate in their ambition, but be in perpetual motion, and so obey the dictates of their genius in managing the commonwealth; because they would be more tormented and would suffer greater damages by idleness, if they were disappointed of that they were in the eager pursuit of. But the philosopher is absurd in this, that he doth not excite men who have abilities to qualify themselves for charges in the government, but only

¹ Eurip. *Orestes*, 258.

² Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 519.

³ *Odyss.* I. 191.

⁴ *Il.* I. 488.

⁵ *Il.* XVIII. 104.



those who are of a restless and unquiet disposition. For the tranquillity and perturbation of the mind are not to be measured by the fewness or multitude of our actions, but by their beauty or turpitude; since the omission of what is good is no less troublesome than the commission of evil.

3 As for those who think there is one positive state of life, which is always serene, — some fancying it to be of the husbandmen, others of those which are unmarried, and some of kings, — Menander clearly shows them their error in these verses: —

I thought those men, my Phania, always best,
Who take no money up at interest;
Who disengaged from business spend the day,
And in complaints don't sigh the night away,
Who, troubled, lamentable groans don't fetch,
Thus breathing out, Ah! miserable wretch!
Those whom despairing thoughts don't waking keep,
But without startings sweetly take their sleep.

He goes on and observes to us, that the same lot of misfortune falls to the rich as well as the poor: —

These neighbors slender confines do divide, —
Sorrow and human life are still allied.
It the luxurious liver doth infest,
And robs the man of honor of his rest;
In stricter ties doth with the poor engage,
With him grows old to a decrepit age.

But as timorous and raw sailors in a boat, when they grow sick with the working of the waves, think they shall overcome their pukings if they go on board of a ship, but there being equally out of order, go into a galley, but are therefore never the better, because they carry their nauseousness and fear along with them; so the several changes of life do only shift and not wholly extirpate the causes of our trouble. And these are only our want of experience, the weakness of our judgment, and a certain impotence of mind which hinders us from making a right use of what we enjoy. The rich man is subject to this uneasiness of humor as well as the poor; the bachelor as well as the man in wedlock. This makes the pleader withdraw from the bar, and then his retirement is altogether as irksome. And this infuseth a desire into others to be presented at court; and when they come there, they presently grow weary of the life.

Poor men when sick do peevishly complain,
The sense of want doth aggravate their pain.⁶

For then the wife grows officious in her attendance, the physician himself is a disease, and the bed is not made easy enough to his mind; even his friend importunes him with his visits: —

He doth molest him when he first doth come,
And when he goes away he's troublesome,

⁶ Eurip. *Orestes*, 232.



as Ion expresseth it. But when the heat of the disease is over and the former temperature of the body is restored, then health returns, and brings with it all those pleasant images which sickness chased away; so that he that yesterday refused eggs and delicate cakes and the finest manchets will now snap eagerly at a piece of household bread, with an olive and a few water-cresses.

4 So reason makes all sorts of life easy, and every change pleasant. Alexander wept when he heard from Anaxarchus that there was an infinite number of worlds, and his friends asking him if any accident had befallen him, he returns this answer: Do not you think it a matter worthy of lamentation, that, when there is such a vast multitude of them, we have not yet conquered one? But Crates with only his scrip and tattered cloak laughed out his life jocosely, as if he had been always at a festival. The great power and command of Agamemnon gave him an equal disturbance: —

Look upon Agamemnon, Atreus's son,
What mighty loads of trouble he hath on.
He is distracted with perpetual care;
Jove that inflicts it gives him strength to bear.⁷

Diogenes, when he was exposed to sale in the market and was commanded to stand up, not only refused to do it, but ridiculed the auctioneer, with this piece of raillery: What! if you were selling a fish, would you bid it rise up? Socrates was a philosopher in the prison, and discoursed with his friends, though he was fettered. But Phaeton, when he climbed up into heaven, thought himself unhappy there, because nobody would give him his father's chariot and the horses of the sun. As therefore the shoe is twisted to the shape of the foot and not in the opposite way, so do the affections of the mind render the life conformable to themselves. For it is not custom, as one observed, which makes even the best life pleasant to those who choose it, but it must be prudence in conjunction with it, which makes it not only the best for its kind, but sweetest in its enjoyment. The fountain therefore of tranquillity being in ourselves, let us cleanse it from all impurity and make its streams limpid, that all external accidents, by being made familiar, may be no longer grievous to us, since we shall know how to use them well.

Let not these things thy least concern engage;
For though thou fret, they will not mind thy rage.
Him only good and happy we may call
Who rightly useth what doth him befall.⁸

5 For Plato compared our life to a game at dice, where we ought to throw for what is most commodious for us, but when we have thrown, to make the best of our casts. We cannot make what chances we please turn up, if we play fair; this lies out of our power. That which is within our power, and is our duty if we are wise, is to accept patiently what Fortune shall allot us, and so to adjust things in their proper places, that what is our own may be disposed of to the best advantage, and what hath happened against our will may offend us as little as possible. But as to men who live

⁷ *Il. X.* 88.

⁸ From Eurip. *Bellerophon*.



without measures and with no prudence, like those whose constitution is so sickly and infirm that they are equally impatient both of heats and colds, prosperity exalts them above their temper, and adversity dejects them beneath it; indeed each fortune disturbs them, or rather they raise up storms to themselves in either, and they are especially querulous under good circumstances. Theodorus, who was called the Atheist, was used to say, that he reached out his instructions with the right hand, and his auditors received them with their left hands. So men of no education, when Fortune would even be complaisant to them, are yet so awkward in their observance, that they take her addresses on the wrong side. On the contrary, men that are wise, as the bees draw honey from the thyme, which is a most unsavory and dry herb, extract something that is convenient and useful even from the most bitter afflictions.

6 This therefore let us learn and have inculcated upon us; like the man who threw a stone at a bitch, but hit his step-mother, on which he exclaimed, Not so bad. So we may often turn the direction of what Fortune obtrudes upon us contrary to our desires. Diogenes was driven into banishment, but it was “not so bad” for him; for of an exile he became a philosopher. Zeno of Citium, when he heard that the only ship he had left was sunk by an unmerciful tempest, with all the rich cargo that was in her, brake out into this exclamation: Fortune, I applaud thy contrivance, who by this means hast reduced me to a threadbare cloak and the piazza of the Stoics. What hinders then but that these examples should be the patterns of our imitation? Thou stoodst candidate for a place in the government, and wast baulked in thy hopes; consider that thou wilt live at ease in thy own country, following thy own affairs. Thou wast ambitious to be the confidant of some great person, and sufferedst a repulse; thou wilt gain thus much by it, that thou wilt be free from danger and disembarassed from business. Again, hast thou managed any affairs full of intricacy and trouble? Hot water doth not so much cherish the soft members of the body, as Pindar⁹ expresseth it, as glory and honor joined with power sweeten all our toils and make labor easy. Hast thou met with any unfortunate success? Hath calumny bit, or envy hissed at thee? There is yet a prosperous gale, which sits fair to convey thee to the port of the Muses and land thee at the Academy. This Plato did, after he made shipwreck of the friendship of Diogenes. And indeed it highly conduceth to the tranquillity of the mind, to look back upon illustrious men and see with what temper they have borne their calamities. For instance, doth it trouble thee that thou wantest children? Consider that kings of the Romans have died without them, — had kingdoms to leave, but no heirs. Doth poverty and low condition afflict thee? It is put to thy option, wouldst thou not rather of all the Boeotians be Epaminondas, and of all the Romans Fabricius? But thy bed is violated, and thy wife is an adulteress. Didst thou never read this inscription at Delphi? —

Here am I set by Agis' royal hand,
Who both the earth and ocean did command.

And yet did the report never arrive thee that Alcibiades debauched this king's wife, Timaea? — and that she herself whispered archly to her maids, that the child was not the genuine offspring of her husband, but a young Alcibiades? Yet this did not

⁹ Pindar, *Nem.* IV. 6.



obstruct the glory of the man; for, notwithstanding his being a cuckold, he was the greatest and most famous among the Greeks. Nor did the dissolute manners of his daughter hinder Stilpo from enlivening his humor and being the jolliest philosopher of his time; for when Metrocles upbraided him with it, he asked him whether he was the offender or his mad girl. He answered, that it was her sin but his misfortune. To which Stilpo replied: But are not sins lapses? No doubt of it, saith Metrocles. And is not that properly called lapse, when we fall off from the attainment of those things we were in the pursuit of? He could not deny it. He pursued him further with this question: And are not these unlucky traverses misfortunes to them who are thus disappointed? Thus by a pleasant and philosophical reasoning he turned the discourse, and showed the Cynic that his calumny was idle and he barked in vain.

7 But there are some whom not only the evil dispositions of their friends and domestics, but those of their enemies, give disturbance to. For a proneness to speak evil of another, anger, envy, ill-nature, a jealous and perverse temper, are the pests of those who are infected with them. And these serve only to trouble and exasperate fools, like the brawls of scolding neighbors, the peevishness of our acquaintance, and the iniquity or want of qualifications in those who administer the government. But thou seemest to me to be especially concerned with affairs of this nature; for, like the physicians mentioned by Sophocles, —

Who bitter choler cleanse and scour
With drugs as bitter and as sour,

— thou dost let other men's enormities sour thy blood; which is highly irrational. For, even in matters of private management, thou dost not always employ men of wit and address, which are the most proper for such an execution, but sometimes those of rough and crooked dispositions; and to animadvert upon them for every peccadillo thou must not think belongs to thee, nor is it easy in the performance. But if thou makest that use of them, as chirurgeons do of forceps to pull out teeth or ligatures to bind wounds, and so appear cheerful whatever falls out, the satisfaction of thy mind will delight thee more than the concern at other men's pravity and malicious humor will disturb thee. Otherwise, as dogs bark at all persons indifferently, so, if thou persecutest everybody that offends thee, thou wilt bring the matter to this pass by thy imprudence, that all things will flow down into this imbecility of thy mind, as a place void and capable of receiving them, and at last thou wilt be filled with nothing but other men's miscarriages. For if some of the philosophers inveigh against compassion which others' calamities affect us with, as a soft affection (saying, that we ought to give real assistance to those in distress, and not to be dejected or sympathize with them), and if — which is a thing of higher moment — they discard all sadness and uneasiness when the sense of a vice or a disease is upon us, saying that we ought to cure the indisposition without being grieved; is it not highly consonant to reason, that we should not storm or fret, if those we have to do with are not so wise and honest as they should be? Let us consider the thing truly, my Paccius, lest, whilst we find fault with others, we prove partial in our own respect through inadvertency, and lest our censuring their failings may proceed not so much from a hatred of their vices as from love of ourselves. We should not have our passions moved at every provocation, nor let our desires grow exorbitant beyond what is just; for these little aversions



of our temper engender suspicions, and infuse moroseness into us, which makes us surly to those who precluded the way to our ambition, or who made us fall into those disastrous events we would willingly have shunned. But he that hath a smoothness in his nature and a talent of moderation can transact and converse with mankind easily and with mildness.

8 Let us recapitulate therefore what we have said. When we are in a fever, every thing that we taste is not only unsavory but bitter; but when we see others relish it without any disgust, we do not then lay the blame either upon the meat or drink, but conclude that only ourselves and the disease are in fault. In like manner we shall cease to bear things impatiently, if we see others enjoy them with alacrity and humor. And this likewise is a great promoter of the tranquillity of the mind, if, amongst those ill successes which carry a dismal appearance, we look upon other events which have a more beautiful aspect, and so blend them together that we may overcome the bad by the mixture of the good. But although, when our eyes are dazzled with too intense a splendor, we refresh our sight by viewing something that is green and florid, yet we fix the optics of our minds upon doleful objects, and compel them to dwell upon the recital of our miseries, plucking them perforce, as it were, from the consideration of what is better. And here we may insert that which was said to a pragmatistical fellow, handsomely enough: —

Why so quick sighted others' faults to find,
But to thy own so partially art blind?
'Tis malice that exasperates thy mind.

But why, my friend, art thou so acute to discern even thy own misfortunes, and so industrious to renew them and set them in thy sight, that they may be the more conspicuous, while thou never turnest thy consideration to those good things which are present with thee and thou dost enjoy? But as cupping-glasses draw the impurest blood out of the body, so thou dost extract the quintessence of infelicity to afflict thyself. In this thou art no better than the Chian merchant, who, while he sold abundance of his best and most generous wine to others, called for some that was pricked and vapid to taste at supper; and one of his servants asking another what he left his master doing, he made this answer, that he was calling for bad when the good was by him. For most men leave the pleasant and delectable things behind them, and run with haste to embrace those which are not only difficult but intolerable. Aristippus was not of this number, for he knew, even to the niceness of a grain, to put prosperous against adverse fortune into the scale, that the one might outweigh the other. Therefore when he lost a noble farm, he asked one of his dissembled friends, who pretended to be sorry, not only with regret but impatience, for his mishap: Thou hast but one piece of land, but have I not three farms yet remaining? He assenting to the truth of it: Why then, saith he, should I not rather lament your misfortune, since it is the raving only of a mad man to be concerned at what is lost, and not rather rejoice in what is left? Thus, as children, if you rob them of one of their play-games, will throw away the rest, and cry and scream; so, if Fortune infest us only in one part, we grow fearful and abandon ourselves wholly to her attacks.



9 But somebody will object to me, What is it that we have? Rather, What is it that we have not? One is honorable, the other is master of a family; this man hath a good wife, the other a faithful friend. Antipater of Tarsus, when he was upon his death-bed and reckoning up all the good events which had befallen him, would not omit a prosperous voyage which he had when he sailed from Cilicia to Athens. Even the trite and common blessings are not to be despised, but ought to take up a room in our deliberations. We should rejoice that we live, and are in health, and see the sun; that there are no wars nor seditions in our country; that the earth yields to cultivation, and that the sea is open to our traffic; that we can talk, be silent, do business, and be at leisure, when we please. They will afford us greater tranquillity of mind present, if we form some just ideas of them when they are absent; if we often call to our remembrance how solicitous the sick man is after health, how acceptable peace is to put out a war, and what a courtesy it will do us to gain credit and acquire friends in a city of note, where we are strangers and unknown; and contrariwise, how great a grief it is to forego these things when we once have them. For surely a thing does not become great and precious when we have lost it, while it is of no account so long as we possess it; for the value of a thing cannot be increased by its loss. But we ought not to take pains to acquire things as being of great value, and to be in fear and trembling lest we may lose them, as if they were precious, and then all the time they are safe in our possession, to neglect them as if they were of no importance. But we are so to use them that we may reap satisfaction and gain a solid pleasure from them, that so we may be the better enabled to endure their loss with evenness of temper. But most men, as Arcesilaus observed, think they must be critics upon other men's poems, survey their pictures with a curious eye, and examine their statues with all the delicacy of sculpture, but in the meanwhile transiently pass over their own lives, though there be some things in them which will not only detain but please their consideration. But they will not restrain the prospect to themselves, but are perpetually looking abroad, and so become servile admirers of other men's fortune and reputation; as adulterers are always gloating upon other men's wives and contemning their own.

10 Besides, this is a thing highly conducing to the tranquillity of the mind, for a man chiefly to consider himself and his own affairs. But if this always cannot take place, he should not make comparisons with men of a superior condition to himself; though this is the epidemical frenzy of the vulgar. As for instance, slaves who lie in fetters applaud their good fortune whose shackles are off; those who are loosed from their bonds would be free men by manumission; these again aspire to be citizens; the citizen would be rich; the wealthy man would be a governor of a province; the haughty governor would be a king, and the king a God, hardly resting content unless he can hurl thunderbolts and dart lightning. So all are eager for what is above them, and are never content with what they have.

The wealth of golden Gyges has no delight for me.

Likewise, —

No emulation doth my spirits fire,
The actions of the Gods I don't admire.



I would not, to be great, a tyrant be;
The least appearances I would not see.

But one of Thasis, another of Chios, one of Galatia, and a fourth of Bithynia, not contenting themselves with the rank they enjoyed amongst their fellow-citizens, where they had honor and commands, complain that they have not foreign characters and are not made patricians of Rome; and if they attain that dignity, that they are not praetors; and if they arrive even to that degree, they still think themselves ill dealt with that they are not consuls; and when promoted to the fasces, that they were declared the second, and not the first. And what is all this but ungratefully accusing Fortune, and industriously picking out occasions to punish and torment ourselves? But he that is in his right senses and wise for his own advantage, out of those many millions which the sun looks upon,

Who of the products of the earth do eat,¹⁰

if he sees any one in the mighty throng who is more rich and honorable than himself, he is neither dejected in his mind nor countenance, nor doth he pensively sit down deploring his unhappiness, but he walks abroad publicly with an honest assurance. He celebrates his own good genius, and boasts of his good fortune in that it is happier than a thousand other men's which are in the world. In the Olympic games you cannot gain the victory choosing your antagonist. But in human life affairs allow thee to excel many and to bear thyself aloft, and to be envied rather than envious; unless indeed thou dost match thyself unequally with a Briareus or a Hercules. Therefore, when thou art surprised into a false admiration of him who is carried in his sedan, cast thy eyes downward upon the slaves who support his luxury. When thou art wondering at the greatness of Xerxes crossing the Hellespont, consider those wretches who are digging through Mount Athos, who are urged to their labor with blows, blood being mixed with their sweat; call to mind that they had their ears and noses cut off, because the bridge was broken by the violence of the waves; think upon that secret reflection they have, and how happy they would esteem thy life and condition. Socrates hearing one of his friends crying out, How dear things are sold in this city! the wine of Chios costs a mina, the purple fish three, and a half pint of honey five drachms, — he brought him to the meal-shop, and showed him that half a peck of flour was sold for a penny. 'Tis a cheap city, said he. Then he brought him to the oil-man's, and told him he might have a quart of olives for two farthings. At last he went to the salesman's, and convinced him that the purchase of a sleeveless jerkin was only ten drachms. 'Tis a cheap city, he repeated. So, when we hear others declare that our condition is afflicted because we are not consuls and in eminent command, let us then look upon ourselves as living not only in a bare happiness but splendor, in that we do not beg our bread, and are not forced to subsist by carrying of burthens or by flattery.

¹⁰ Simonides, 5, 17.



11 But such is our folly, that we accustom ourselves rather to live for other men's sakes than our own; and our dispositions are so prone to upbraidings and to be tainted with envy, that the grief we conceive at others' prosperity lessens the joy we ought to take in our own. But to cure thee of this extravagant emulation, look not upon the outside of these applauded men, which is so gay and brilliant, but draw the gaudy curtain and carry thy eyes inward, and thou shalt find most gnawing disquiets to be dissembled under these false appearances. When the renowned Pittacus, who got him so great a name for his fortitude, wisdom, and justice, was entertaining his friends at a noble banquet, and his spouse in an angry humor came and overturned the table; his guests being extremely disturbed at it, he told them: Every one of you hath his particular plague, and my wife is mine; and he is very happy who hath this only.

The pleading lawyer's happy at the bar;
But the scene opening shows a civil war.
For the good man hath a domestic strife,
He's slave to that imperious creature, wife.
Scolding without doors doth to him belong,
But she within them doth claim all the tongue.
Pecked by his female tyrant him I see,
Whilst from this grievance I myself am free.

These are the secret stings which are inseparable from honor, riches, and dominion, and which are unknown to the vulgar, because a counterfeit lustre dazzleth their sight.

All pleasant things Atrides doth adorn;
The merry genius smiled when he was born.¹¹

And they compute this happiness from his great stores of ammunition, his variety of managed horses, and his battalions of disciplined men. But an inward voice of sorrow seems to silence all this ostentation with mournful accents: —

Jove in a deep affliction did him plunge.¹²

Observe this likewise: —

Old man, I reverence thy aged head,
Who to a mighty length hast spun thy thread;
Safe from all dangers, to the grave goest down
Ingloriously, because thou art unknown.¹³

Such expostulations as these with thyself will serve to dispel this querulous humor, which makes thee fondly applaud other people's conditions and depreciate thy own.

¹¹ *Il. III.* 182.

¹² *Il. II.* 111.

¹³ Eurip. *Iph. Aul.* 16.



12 This likewise greatly obstructs the tranquillity of the mind, that our desires are immoderate and not suited to our abilities of attainment, which, like sails beyond the proportion of the vessel, help only to overset it; so that, being blown up with extravagant expectations, if ill success frustrates our attempts, we presently curse our stars and accuse Fortune, when we ought rather to lay the blame upon our enterprising folly. For we do not reckon him unfortunate who will shoot with a ploughshare, and let slip an ox at a hare. Nor is he born under an unlucky influence who cannot catch a buck with a sling or drag-net; for it was the weakness and perverseness of his mind which inflamed him on to impossible things. The partial love of himself is chiefly in fault, which infuseth a vicious inclination to arrogate, and an insatiable ambition to attempt every thing. For they are not content with the affluence of riches and the accomplishments of the mind, that they are robust, have a complaisance of humor and strength of brain for company, that they are privadoes to princes and governors of cities, unless they have dogs of great sagacity and swiftness, horses of a generous strain, nay, unless their quails and cocks are better than other men's. Old Dionysius, not being satisfied that he was the greatest potentate of his time, grew angry, even to a frenzy, that Philoxenus the poet exceeded him in the sweetness of his voice, and Plato in the subtleties of disputation; therefore he condemned one to the quarries, and sold the other into Aegina. But Alexander was of another temper; for when Criso the famous runner contended with him for swiftness, and seemed to be designedly lagging behind and yielding the race, he was in a great rage with him. And Achilles in Homer spake very well, when he said: —

None of the Greeks for courage me excel;
Let others have the praise of speaking well.¹⁴

When Megabyzus the Persian came into the shop of Apelles, and began to ask some impertinent questions concerning his art, the famous painter checked him into silence with this reprimand: As long as thou didst hold thy peace, thou didst appear to be a man of condition, and I paid a deference to the eclat of thy purple and the lustre of thy gold; but now, since thou art frivolous, thou exposest thyself to the laughter even of my boys that mix the colors. Some think the Stoics very childish, when they hear them affirm that the wise man must not only deserve that appellation for his prudence, be of exact justice and great fortitude, but must likewise have all the flowers of a rhetorician and the conduct of a general, must have the elegancies of a poet, be very wealthy, and called a king; but these good men claim all these titles for themselves, and if they do not receive them, they grow peevish and are presently out of temper. But the qualifications of the Gods themselves are different; for the one is styled the deity of war, another of the oracle, a third of traffic; and Jupiter makes Venus preside over marriages and be goddess of the nuptial bed, the delicacy of her sex being unapt for martial affairs.

¹⁴ *Il.* XVIII. 105.



13 And there are some things which carry a contrariety in their nature, and cannot be consistent. As for instance, the study of the mathematics and practice in oratory are exercises which require a great leisure and freedom from other concerns; but the intrigues of politics cannot be managed, and the favor of princes cannot be attained or cultivated, without severe application and being involved in affairs of high moment. Then the indulging ourselves to drink wine and eat flesh makes the body strong, but it effeminates the mind. Industry to acquire and care to preserve our wealth do infinitely increase it; but the contempt of riches is the best refreshment in our philosophic journey. Hence it is very manifest that there is a wide difference in things, and that we ought to obey the inscription of the Pythian oracle, that every man should know himself, that he should not constrain his genius but leave it to its own propensities, and then that he should apply himself to that to which he is most adapted, and not do violence to Nature by dragging her perforce to this or that course of life.

With generous provender they the horse do feed,
That he may win the race with strength and speed.
The mighty ox is fitted to the yoke,
And by his toil the fertile clods are broke.
The dolphin, when a ship he doth espy,
Straight the good-natured fish his fins doth ply;
By the ship's motion he his own doth guide,
And lovingly swims constant to her side.
And if you'd apprehend the foaming boar,
The monster by a mastiff must be tore.¹⁵

But he is stupid in his wishes who takes it amiss that he is not a lion,

Who with a proud insulting air doth tread,
Rough as the mountains where he first was bred;¹⁶

or that he is not a Malta-shock, delicately brought up in the lap of a fond widow. He is not a jot more rational who would be an Empedocles, a Plato, or a Democritus, and write about the universe and the reality of things therein, and at the same time would sleep by the dry side of an old woman, because she is rich, as Euphorion did; or be admitted to debauch with Alexander amongst his club of drunkards, as Medius was; or be concerned that he is not in as high a vogue of admiration as Ismenias was for his riches and Epaminondas for his virtue. For those who run races do not think they have injury done them if they are not crowned with those garlands which are due to the wrestlers, but they are rather transported with joy at their own rewards. "Sparta has fallen to thy lot; honor and adorn her." Solon hath expressed himself to this purpose: —

Virtue for sordid wealth shall not be sold;
It's beauty far outshines the miser's gold.

¹⁵ Pindar, Frag. 258 (Boeckh).

¹⁶ *Odyss.* VI. 130; *Il.* XVII. 61.



This without Fortune's shocks doth still endure;
But that's possession is insecure.¹⁷

And Strato, who wrote of physics, when he heard that Menedemus had a great number of scholars, asked: What wonder is it, if more come to wash than to be anointed? And Aristotle, writing to Antipater, declared, that Alexander was not the only one who ought to think highly of himself because his dominion extended over many subjects, since they had a right to think as well of themselves who entertained becoming sentiments of the Gods. So that, by having a just opinion of our own excellences, we shall be disturbed with the less envy against those of other men. But now, although in other cases we do not expect figs from the vine nor grapes from the olive-tree, yet, if we have not the complicated titles of being rich and learned, philosophers in the schools and commanders in the field, if we cannot flatter, and have the facetious liberty to speak what we please, nay, if we are not counted parsimonious and splendid in our expenses at the same time, we grow uneasy to ourselves, and despise our life as maimed and imperfect. Besides, Nature seems to instruct us herself; for, as she ministers different sorts of food to her animals, and hath endowed them with diversity of appetites, — some to eat flesh, others to pick up seed, and others to dig up roots for their nourishment, — so she hath bestowed upon her rational creatures various sorts of accommodations to sustain their being. The shepherd hath one distinct from the ploughman; the fowler hath another peculiar to himself; and the fourth lives by the sea. So that in common equity we ought to labor in that vocation which is appointed and most commodious for us, and let alone the rest; and so not to prove that Hesiod fell short of the truth when he spake after this manner: —

The potter hates another of the trade
If by his hands a finer dish is made;
The smith his brother smudge with scorn doth treat,
If he his iron strikes with brisker heat.¹⁸

And this emulation is not confined to mechanics and those who follow the same occupations; but the rich man envies the learned. He that hath a bright reputation envies the miser's guineas, and the pettifogger thinks he is outdone in talking by the sophister. Nay, by Heaven, he that is born free sottishly admires the servile attendance of him who is of the household to a king; and the man that hath patrician blood in his veins calls the comedian happy who acts his part gracefully and with humor, and applauds even the mimic who pleaseth with farce and scaramouchy gestures; thus by a false estimate of happiness they disturb and perplex themselves.

14 Now that every man hath a storehouse of trouble and contentment in his own bosom, and that the vessels which contain good and evil are not placed at Jupiter's threshold,¹⁹ but in the recesses of the mind, the variety of our passions is an abundant demonstration. The fool doth not discern, and consequently cannot mind, the good that is obvious to him, for his thoughts are still intent upon the future; but the

¹⁷ Solon, Frag. 15.

¹⁸ Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 25.

¹⁹ See *Il.* XXIV. 527.



prudent man retrieves things that were lost out of their oblivion, by strength of recollection renders them perspicuous, and enjoys them as if they were present. Happiness having only a few coy minutes to be courted in, the man that hath no intellect neglects this opportunity, and so it slides away from his sense and no more belongs to him. But like him that is painted in hell twisting a rope, and who lets the ass that is by him devour all the laborious textures as fast as he makes them, so most men have such a lethargy of forgetfulness upon them, that they lose the remembrance of all great actions, and no more call to mind their pleasant intervals of leisure and repose. The relish of their former banquets is grown insipid, and delight hath left no piquant impression upon their palates; by this means they break as it were the continuity of life, and destroy the union of present things to the past; and dividing yesterday from to-day and to-day from to-morrow, they utterly efface all events, as if they had never been. For, as those who are dogmatical in the schools, and deny the augmentation of bodies by reason of the perpetual flux of all substance, do strip us out of ourselves and make no man to be the same to-day that he was yesterday; so those who bury all things that have preceded them in oblivion, who lose all the notices of former times and let them all be shattered carelessly out of their minds, do every day make themselves void and empty; and they become utterly dependent on the morrow, as if those things which happened last year and yesterday and the day before were not to affect their cognizance and be occurrences worthy their observation.

15 This is a great impediment to the tranquillity of the mind. But that which is its more sensible disturbance is this, that as flies upon a mirror easily slide down the smooth and polished parts of it, but stick to those which are rugged and uneven and fall into its flaws, so men let what is cheerful and pleasant flow from them, and dwell only upon sad melancholy remembrances. Nay, as those of Olynthus carry beetles into a certain place, which from the destruction of them is called their slaughter-house, where, all passages being stopped against their escape, they are killed by the weariness of perpetual flying about; so when men have once fallen upon the memory of their former sorrows, no consolation can take them off from the mournful theme. But as in a landscape we draw the most beautiful colors, so we ought to fill the prospect of our minds with the most agreeable and sprightly images; that, if we cannot utterly abolish those which are dark and unpleasant, we may at least obscure them by more gay and lively representations. For as the strings of a lute or bow, so is the harmony of the world alternately tightened and relaxed by vicissitude and change; and in human affairs there is nothing that is unmixed, nothing that is unallied. But as in music there are some sounds which are flat and some sharp, and in grammar some letters that are vocal and some mute, but neither the man of concord nor syntax doth industriously decline one sort, but with the fineness of his art mixeth them together; so in things in this world which carry a direct opposition in their nature one to another, — when, as Euripides expresseth it,

The good things with the evil still are joined,
And in strict union mutually combined;
The chequered work doth beautiful appear,
For what is sweet allays the more severe;



— yet we ought not to be discouraged or have any despondencies. But in this case let us imitate the musicians, who drown the harsh cadences with others that more caress the ear; so, by tempering our adverse fortune with what is more prosperous, let us render our lives pleasant and of an equal tone. For that is not true which Menander tells us: —

Soon as an infant doth salute the day,
A genius his first cryings doth obey,
And to his charge comes hastily away;
The daemon doth assist the tender lad,
Shows him what's good, and saves him from the bad.

But the opinion of Empedocles deserves more our approbation, who saith that, as soon as any one is born, he is carefully taken up and governed by two guardian spirits.

“There were Chthonia and far-seeing Heliopé, and bloody Deris and grave-faced Harmonia, Kallisto and Aeschra, Thoösa and Denaea, with lovely Nemertes and black-fruited Asaphaea.”

16 By this diversity of characters is expressed only the variety of our passions; and these are the seeds of discontent we brought into the world with us. Since now these disorder our lives and make them unequal, he that is master of himself wishes for the better, but expects the worse; but he useth them both with a moderation suitable to that injunction, Do not any thing too much. For, as Epicurus said, not only does he that is least impatient after to-morrow enjoy it most when it comes; but honor, riches, and power give those the greatest complacency who are not tormented with any apprehensions that the contrary will befall them. For an immoderate craving after things of this nature infuseth a fear of losing them, equal to the first intemperate desire. This deadens the fruition, and makes the pleasure as weak and unstable as flame driven by the wind. But he to whom his reason hath given the assurance that he can boldly say to Fortune,

Welcome to me, if good thou bringest aught,
And if thou fail, I will take little thought, —

this is the man who can confidently enjoy what is present with him, and who is not afflicted with such cowardice of thoughts as to be in constant alarms lest he should lose his possessions, which would be an intolerable grievance. But let us not only admire but imitate that temper of mind in Anaxagoras, which made him express himself in these words upon the death of his son: —

I knew that I had begotten a mortal.

And let us apply it to all the casualties of our life after this manner. I know my riches have only the duration of a day; I know that the same hand which bestowed authority upon me could spoil me of those ornaments and take it away again; I know my wife to be the best of women, but still a woman; my friend to be faithful, yet the cement might be broken, for he was a man, — which, as Plato saith, is a very inconstant creature. These previous expostulations and preparations, if any thing fall out which is against our mind but not contrary to our expectation, will cure the palpita-



tion of our hearts, make our disturbances settle and go down, and bring our minds to a consistence; not indulging us in these lazy exclamations, Who would have thought it? — I looked for better, and did not expect this. Carneades gives us a short memoir concerning great things, that the cause from whence all our troubles proceed is that they befall unexpectedly. The kingdom of Macedon compared with the Roman empire sank in the competition, for it was only an inconsiderable part of it; yet when Perseus lost it, he not only deplored his own misfortune, but he was thought by all the most abject and miserable of mankind. Yet Aemilius that conquered him, when he delivered up the command of sea and land into the hands of a successor, was crowned and did sacrifice, and was esteemed happy. For he knew, when he received his honor, that it was but temporary, and that he must lay down the authority he had taken up. But Perseus was stripped of his dominions by surprise. The poet hath prettily illustrated what it is for a thing to fall out unexpectedly. For Ulysses, when his dog died, could not forbear crying, yet would not suffer himself to weep when his wife sate by him crying, but stopped his tears; for here he came strengthened with reason and beforehand acquainted with the accident, but before it was the suddenness of the disaster which raised his sorrow and threw him into complaints.

17 Generally speaking, those things which happen to us against our will afflict us partly by a pungency that is in their nature, and partly custom and opinion so effeminate us that we are impatient under them. But against all contingencies we should have that of Menander in readiness: —

Afflictions to thyself thou dost create,
Thy fancy only is unfortunate.

For what are afflictions to thee, if they touch neither thy body nor thy soul? Of this sort is the low extraction of thy father, the adultery of thy wife, the loss of a garland, or being deprived of the upper seat in an assembly. And with all these crosses thou mayest have ease of mind and strength of body. But to those things which in their own nature excite our grief, — such as sickness, pains of the body, and the death of our friends and children, — we ought to apply that of Euripides: —

Alas! alas! and well-a-day!
But why *alas* and *well away*?
Naught else to us hath yet been dealt,
But that which daily men have felt.

There is no reasoning more effectual to restrain our passions and hinder our minds from falling into despair, than that which sets before us a physical necessity and the common lot of nature. And it is our bodies only that lie exposed to this destiny, and which we offer (as it were) as a handle to Fortune; but the fort-royal is still secure, where our strength lies and our most precious things are treasured up. When Demetrius took Megara, he asked Stilpo whether he had not suffered particular damage in the plundering; to which he made this answer, that he saw nobody that could rob him. So when Fate hath made all the depredations upon us it possibly can and hath left us naked, yet there is something still within us which is out of the reach of the pirate, —



Which conquering Greece could never force away.²⁰

Therefore we ought not so to vilify and depress our nature as if it could not get the ascendant over Fortune, and had nothing of firmness and stability in it. But we ought rather to consider that, if any part of us is obnoxious to this, it is only that which is the smallest, and the most impure and sickly too; whilst the better and more generous we have the most absolute dominion of, and our chiefest goods are placed in it, such as true discipline, a right notion of things, and reasonings which in their last results bring us unto virtue; which are so far from being abolished, that they cannot be corrupted. We ought likewise, with an invincible spirit and a bold security as regards futurity, to answer Fortune in those words which Socrates retorted upon his judges: Anytus and Meletus may kill, but they cannot hurt me. So she can afflict me with a disease, can spoil me of my riches, disgrace me with my prince, and bring me under a popular odium; but she cannot make a good man wicked, or the brave man a mean and degenerate coward; she cannot cast envy upon a generous temper, or destroy any of those habits of the mind which are more useful to us in the conduct of our lives, when they are within the command of our wills, than the skill of a pilot in a storm. For the pilot cannot mitigate the billows or calm the winds; he cannot sail into the haven as often as he has occasion, or without fear and trembling abide any danger that may befall him; but after having used all his efforts, he at last recommits himself to the fury of the storm, pulls down all his sails by the board, whilst the lower mast is within an inch of the abyss, and sits trembling at the approaching ruin. But the affections of the mind in a wise man procure tranquillity even to the body. For he prevents the beginnings of disease by temperance, a spare diet, and moderate exercise; but if an evil begin more visibly to show itself, as we sometimes steer our ship by rocks which lie in the water, he must then furl in his sails and pass by it, as Asclepiades expresseth it; but if the waves grow turbulent and the sea rougher, the port is at hand, and he may leave this body, as he would a leaky vessel, and swim ashore.

18 For it is not so much the desire of life as the fear of death, which makes the fool have such a dependence upon the body, and stick so fast to its embraces. So Ulysses held fast by the fig-tree, dreading Charybdis that lay under him, —

Where the wind would not suffer him to stay,
Nor would it serve to carry him away,²¹

so that on this side was but a slender support, and there was inevitable danger on the other. But he who considers the nature of the soul, and that death will transport it to a condition either far better or not much worse than what he now enjoys, hath contempt of death to sustain him as he travelleth on in this pilgrimage of his life, no small *viaticum* towards tranquillity of mind. For as to one that can live pleasantly so long as virtue and the better part of mankind are predominant, and can depart fearlessly so soon as hostile and unnatural principles prevail, saying to himself, —

²⁰ *Il. V.* 484.

²¹ Aesch. *Philoct.* Frag. 246.



Fate shall release me when I please myself,²²

what in the whole scope of the creation can be thought of that can raise a tumult in such a man, or give him the least molestation? Certainly, he that threw out that brave defiance to Fortune in these words, "I have prevented thee, O Fortune, and have shut up all thy avenues to me," did not speak it confiding in the strength of walls or bars, or the security of keys; but it was an effect of his learning, and the challenge was a dictate of his reason. And these heights of resolution any men may attain to if they are willing; and we ought not to distrust, or despair of arriving to the courage of saying the same things. Therefore we should not only admire, but be kindled with emulation, and think ourselves touched with the impulse of a divine instinct, which piques us on to the trial of ourselves in matters of less importance; that thereby we may find how our tempers bear to be qualified for greater, and so may not incuriously decline that inspection we ought to have over ourselves, or take refuge in the saying, Perchance nothing will be more difficult than this. For the luxurious thinker, who withdraws himself from severe reflections and is conversant about no objects but what are easy and delectable, emasculates his understanding and contracts a softness of spirit; but he that makes grief, sickness, and banishment the subjects of his meditation, who composeth his mind sedately, and poiseth himself with reason to sustain the burthen, will find that those things are vain, empty, and false which appear so grievous and terrible to the vulgar, as his own reasonings will make out to him in every particular.

19 But many are shocked at this saying of Menander, —

No man can tell what will himself befall,

— in the mean while being monstrously ignorant what a noble expedient this is to disperse our sorrows, to contemplate upon and to be able to look Fortune steadily in the face; and not to cherish delicate and effeminate apprehensions of things, like those bred up in the shade, under false and extravagant hopes which have not strength to resist the first adversity. But to the saying of Menander we may make this just and serious reply: It is true that a man while he lives can never say, This will never befall me; but he can say this, I will not do this or that; I will scorn to lie; I will not be treacherous or do a thing ungenerously; I will not defraud or circumvent any one. And to do this lies within the sphere of our performance, and conduceth extremely to the tranquillity of the mind. Whereas, on the contrary, the being conscious of having done a wicked action²³ leaves stings of remorse behind it, which, like an ulcer in the flesh, makes the mind smart with perpetual wounds; for reason, which chaseth away all other pains, creates repentance, shames the soul with confusion, and punisheth it with torment. But as those who are chilled with an ague or that burn with a fever feel acuter griefs than those who are scorched with the sun or frozen up with the severity of the weather, so those things which are casual and fortuitous give us the least disturbance, because they are external accidents. But the man whom the truth of this makes uneasy, —

²² Eurip. *Bacchae*, 498.

²³ Eurip. *Orestes*, 396.



Another did not run me on this shelf;
I was the cause of all the ills myself,²⁴

who laments not only his misfortunes but his crimes, finds his agonies sharpened by the turpitude of the fact. Hence it comes to pass, that neither rich furniture nor abundance of gold, not a descent from an illustrious family or greatness of authority, not eloquence and all the charms of speaking can procure so great a serenity of life as a mind free from guilt, kept untainted not only from actions but purposes that are wicked. By this means the soul will be not only unpolluted but undisturbed; the fountain will run clear and unsullied; and the streams that flow from it will be just and honest deeds, ecstasies of satisfaction, a brisk energy of spirit which makes a man an enthusiast in his joy, and a tenacious memory sweeter than hope, which (as Pindar saith) with a virgin warmth cherisheth old age.²⁵ For as censers, even after they are empty, do for a long time after retain their fragrancy, as Carneades expresseth it, so the good actions of a wise man perfume his mind, and leave a rich scent behind them; so that joy is, as it were, watered with these essences, and owes its flourishing to them. This makes him pity those who not only bewail but accuse human life, as if it were only a region of calamities and a place of banishment appointed for their souls.

20 That saying of Diogenes extremely pleaseth me, who, seeing one sprucing himself up very neatly to go to a great entertainment, asked him whether every day was not a festival to a good man. And certainly, that which makes it the more splendid festival is sobriety. For the world is a spacious and beautiful temple; this a man is brought into as soon as he is born, where he is not to be a dull spectator of immovable and lifeless images made by human hands, but is to contemplate sublime things, which (as Plato tells us) the divine mind has exhibited to our senses as likenesses of things in the ideal world, having the principles of life and motion in themselves; such as are the sun, moon, and stars; rivers which are still supplied with fresh accessions of water; and the earth, which with a motherly indulgence suckles the plants and feeds her sensitive creatures. Now since life is the introduction and the most perfect initiation into these mysteries, it is but just that it should be full of cheerfulness and tranquillity. For we are not to imitate the little vulgar, who wait impatiently for the jolly days which are consecrated to Saturn, Bacchus, and Minerva, that they may be merry with hired laughter, and pay such a price to the mimic and stage-dancer for their diversions. At all these games and ceremonies we sit silent and composed; for no man laments when he is initiated in the rites, when he beholds the games of Apollo, or drinks in the Saturnalia. But when the Gods order the scenes at their own festivals, or initiate us into their own mysteries, the enjoyment becomes sordid to us; and we wear out our wretched lives in care, heaviness of spirit, and bitter complaints.

Men are delighted with the harmonious touches of an instrument; they are pleased likewise with the melody of the birds; and it is not without some recreation that they behold the beasts frolicsome and sporting; but when the frisk is over and they begin

²⁴ See *Il.* 1. 335.

²⁵ See Plato, *Repub.* I. p. 331a.



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to bellow and curl their brows, the ungrateful noise and their angry looks offend them. But as for their own lives, they suffer them to pass away without a smile, to boil with passions, be involved in business, and eaten out with endless cares. And to ease them of their solitudes, they will not seek out for remedies themselves, nor will they even hearken to the reasons or admit the consolations of their friends. But if they would only give ear to these, they might bear their present condition without fault-finding, remember the past with joy and gratitude, and live without fear or distrust, looking forward to the future with a joyful and lightsome hope.



Peaceful Love (c 1718) Jean-Antoine Watteau, Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin

