

*Ignorance and Assumption
stretching out a hand to Slander*



Translated by H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler. Frontispiece: Ptolemy I Soter flanked by Ignorance and Assumption, and stretching out a hand to Slander. Detail from the Calumny of Apelles (1495) by Sandro Botticelli, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

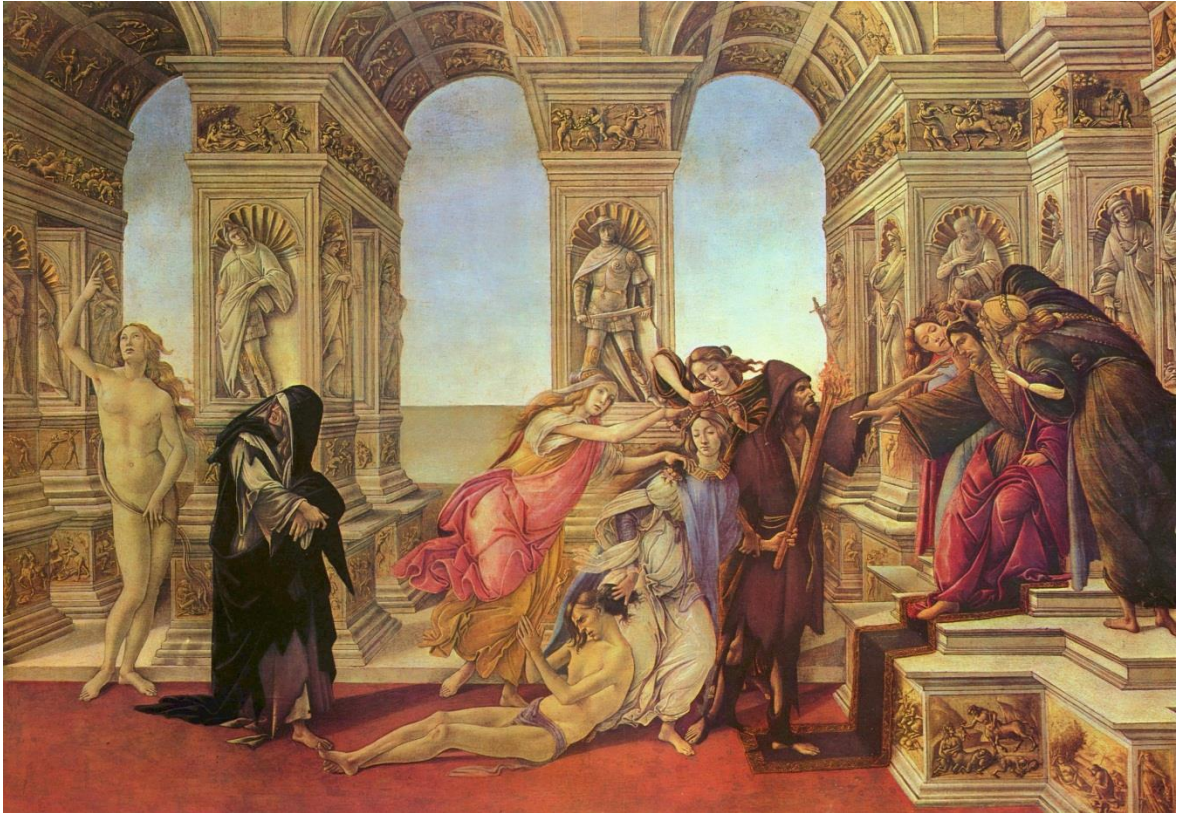
a TERRIBLE THING IS IGNORANCE, the source of endless human woes, spreading a mist over facts, obscuring truth, and casting a gloom upon the individual life. We are all walkers in darkness — or say, our experience is that of blind men, knocking helplessly against the real, and stepping high to clear the imaginary, failing to see what is close at their feet, and in terror of being hurt by something that is leagues away. Whatever we do, we are perpetually slipping about. This it is that has found the tragic poets a thousand themes, Labdacids, Pelopids, and all their kind. Inquiry would show that most of the calamities put upon the boards are arranged by ignorance as by some supernatural stage-manager. This is true enough as a generality; but I refer more particularly to the false reports about intimates and friends that have ruined families, razed cities, driven fathers into frenzy against their offspring, embroiled brother with brother, children with parents, and lover with beloved. Many are the friendships that have been cut short, many the households set by the ears, because slander has found ready credence.

By way of precaution against it, then, it is my design to sketch the nature, the origin, and effects of slander, though indeed the picture is already in existence, by the hand of Apelles. He had been traduced in the ears of Ptolemy as an accomplice of Theodotas in the Tyrian conspiracy. As a matter of fact he had never seen Tyre, and knew nothing of Theodotas beyond the information that he was an officer of Ptolemy's in charge of Phoenicia. However, that did not prevent another painter called Antiphilus, who was jealous of his court influence and professional skill, from reporting his supposed complicity to Ptolemy: he had seen him at Theodotas' table in Phoenicia, whispering in his ear all through dinner; he finally got as far as making Apelles out prime instigator of the Tyrian revolt and the capture of Pelusium.

Ptolemy was not distinguished for sagacity; he had been brought up on the royal diet of adulation; and the incredible tale so inflamed and carried him away that the probabilities of the case never struck him: the traducer was a professional rival; a painter's insignificance was hardly equal to the part; and this particular painter had had nothing but good at his hands, having been exalted by him above his fellows. But no, he did not even find out whether Apelles had ever made a voyage to Tyre; it pleased him to fall into a passion and make the palace ring with denunciations of the ingrate, the plotter, the conspirator. Luckily one of the prisoners, between disgust at Antiphilus' effrontery and compassion for Apelles, stated that the poor man had never been

told a word of their designs; but for this, he would have paid with his head for his non-complicity in the Tyrian troubles.

Ptolemy was sufficiently ashamed of himself, we learn, to make Apelles a present of £25,000, besides handing Antiphilus over to him as a slave. The painter was impressed by his experience, and took his revenge upon Slander in a picture.



The Calumny of Apelles (1495) Sandro Botticelli, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

On the right sits a man with long ears almost of the Midas pattern, stretching out a hand to Slander, who is still some way off, but coming. About him are two females whom I take for Ignorance and Assumption. Slander, approaching from the left, is an extraordinarily beautiful woman, but with a heated, excitable air that suggests delusion and impulsiveness; in her left hand is a lighted torch, and with her right she is haling a youth by the hair; he holds up hands to heaven and calls the Gods to witness his innocence. Showing Slander the way is a man with piercing eyes, but pale, deformed, and shrunken as from long illness; one may easily guess him to be Envy. Two female attendants encourage Slander, acting as tire-women, and adding touches to her beauty; according to the cicerone, one of these is Malice, and the other Deceit. Following behind in mourning guise, black-robed and with torn hair, comes (I think he named her) Repentance. She looks tearfully behind her, awaiting shame-faced the approach of Truth. That was how Apelles translated his peril into paint.

I propose that we too execute in his spirit a portrait of Slander and her surroundings; and to avoid vagueness let us start with a definition or outline. Slander, we will say, is an undefended indictment, concealed from its object, and owing its success to one-sided half-informed procedure. Now we have something to go upon. Further, our ac-

tors, as in comedy,¹ are three — the slanderer, the slandered, and the recipient of the slander; let us take each in turn and see how his case works out.

And first for our chief character, the manufacturer of the slander. That he is not a good man needs no proof; no good man will injure his neighbour; good men's reputation, and their credit for kindness, is based on the benefits they confer upon their friends, not on unfounded disparagement of others and the ousting of them from their friends' affections.

Secondly, it is easy to realize that such a person offends against justice, law, and piety, and is a pest to all who associate with him. Equality in everything, and contentment with your proper share, are the essentials of justice; inequality and overreaching, of injustice; that everyone will admit. It is not less clear that the man who secretly slanders the absent is guilty of over-reaching; he is insisting on entire possession of his hearer, appropriating and enclosing his ears, guarding them against impartiality by blocking them with prejudice. Such procedure is unjust to the last degree; we have the testimony of the best law-givers for that; Solon and Draco made every juror swear that he would hear indifferently, and view both parties with equal benevolence, till the defence should have been compared with the prosecution and proved better or worse than it. Before such balancing of the speeches, they considered that the forming of a conclusion must be impious and unholy. We may indeed literally suppose Heaven to be offended, if we license the accuser to say what he will, and then, closing our own ears or the defendant's mouth, allow our judgement to be dictated by the first speech. No one can say, then, that the uttering of slander is reconcilable with the requirements of justice, of law, or of the juror's oath. If it is objected that the lawgivers are no sufficient authority for such extreme justice and impartiality, I fall back on the prince of poets, who has expressed a sound opinion, or let me say, laid down a sound law on the subject,

or give thy judgement, till both sides are heard.

He too was doubtless very well aware that, of all the ills that flesh is heir to, none is more grievous or more iniquitous than that a man should be condemned unjudged and unheard. That is precisely what the slanderer tries to effect by exposing the slandered without trial to his hearer's wrath, and precluding defence by the secrecy of his denunciation.

Every such person is a skulker and a coward; he will not come into the open; he is an ambuscader shooting from a lurking-place, whose opponent cannot meet him nor have it out with him, but must be shot down helplessly before he knows that war is afoot; there could be no clearer proof that his allegations are baseless. Of course a man who knows he is bringing true charges does the exposure in public, challenges inquiry, and faces examination; just so no one who can win a pitched battle will resort to ambush and deceit.

It is in kings' courts that these creatures are mostly found; they thrive in the atmosphere of dominion and power, where envy is rife, suspicions innumerable, and the

¹ "Cratinus was the first to limit the number of actors to three. . . . There were no further innovations, and the number of the actors in comedy was permanently fixed at three." Haigh's *Attic Theatre*.

opportunities for flattery and back-biting endless. Where hopes are higher, there envy is more intense, hatred more reckless, and jealousy more unscrupulous. They all keep close watch upon one another, spying like duellists for a weak spot. Everyone would be first, and to that end shoves and elbows his neighbour aside, and does his best to pull back or trip the man in front of him. One whose equipment is limited to goodness is very soon thrown down, dragged about, and finally thrust forth with ignominy; while he who is prepared to flatter, and can make servility plausible, is high in credit, gets first to his end, and triumphs. These people bear out the words of Homer:

Th' impartial War-God slayeth him that slew.

Convinced that the prize is great, they elaborate their mutual stratagems, among which slander is at once the speediest and the most uncertain; high are the hopes with which this child of envy or hatred is born; pitiful, gloomy and disastrous the end to which it comes.

Success is by no means the easy simple matter it may be supposed; it demands much skill and tact, with the most concentrated attention. Slander would never do the harm it does, if it were not made plausible; it would never prevail against truth, that strongest of all things, if it were not dressed up into really attractive bait.

The chief mark for it is the man who is in favour, and therefore enviable in the eyes of his distanced competitors; they all regard him as standing in their light, and let fly at him; everyone thinks he will be first if he can only dispose of this conspicuous person and spoil him of his favour. You, may see the same thing among runners at the games. The good runner, from the moment the barrier falls, simply makes the best of his way; his thoughts are on the winning-post, his hopes of victory in his feet; he leaves his neighbour alone and does not concern himself at all with his competitors. It is the ill qualified, with no prospect of winning by his speed, who resorts to foul play; his one pre-occupation is how he may stop, impede, curb the real runner, because failing that his own victory is out of the question. The persons we are concerned with race in like manner for the favour of the great. The one who forges ahead is at once the object of plots, is taken at a disadvantage by his enemies when his thoughts are elsewhere, and got rid of, while they get credit for devotion by the harm they do to others.

The credibility of the slander is by no means left to take care of itself; it is the chief object of their solicitude; they are extremely cautious against inconsistencies or contradictions. The usual method is to seize upon real characteristics of a victim, and only paint these in darker colours, which allows verisimilitude. A man is a doctor; they make him out a poisoner; wealth figures as tyranny; the tyrant's ready tool is a ready traitor too.

Sometimes, however, the hint is taken from the hearer's own nature; the villains succeed by using a bait that will tempt him. They know he is jealous, and they tell him: "He beckoned to your wife at dinner, and sighed as he gazed at her; and Stratonice — well, did not seem offended." Or he writes poetry, and piques himself upon it; then, "Philoxenus had great sport pulling your poem to pieces — said the metre was faulty and the composition vile." A devout religious person is told that his friend

is an atheist and a blasphemer, rejects belief and denies Providence. That is quite enough; the venom has entered at the ear and inflamed the brain; the man does not wait for confirmation, but abandons his friend.

In a word, they invent and say the kind of thing that they know will be most irritating to their hearer, and having a full knowledge of his vulnerable point, concentrate their fire upon it; he is to be too much flustered by rage to have time for investigation; the very surprise of what he is told is to be so convincing to him that he will not hear, even if his friend is willing to plead.

That slander, indeed, is especially effective which is unwelcome; Demetrius the Platonic was reported to Ptolemy Dionysus for a water drinker, and for the only man who had declined to put on female attire at the Dionysia. He was summoned next morning, and had to drink in public, dress up in gauze, clash and dance to the cymbals, or he would have been put to death for disapproving the King's life, and setting up for a critic of his luxurious ways.

At Alexander's court there was no more fatal imputation than that of refusing worship and adoration to Hephaestion. Alexander had been so fond of him that to appoint him a God after his death was, for such a worker of marvels, nothing out of the way. The various cities at once built temples to him, holy ground was consecrated, altars, offerings and festivals instituted to this new divinity; if a man would be believed, he must swear by Hephaestion. For smiling at these proceedings, or showing the slightest lack of reverence, the penalty was death. The flatterers cherished, fanned, and put the bellows to this childish fancy of Alexander's; they had visions and manifestations of Hephaestion to relate; they invented cures and attributed oracles to him; they did not stop short of doing sacrifice to this God of Help and Protection. Alexander was delighted, and ended by believing in it all; it gratified his vanity to think that he was now not only a God's son, but a God-maker. It would be interesting to know how many of his friends in those days found that what the new divinity did for them was to supply a charge of irreverence on which they might be dismissed and deprived of the King's favour.

Agathocles of Samos was a valued officer of his, who very narrowly escaped being thrown into a lion's cage; the offence reported against him was shedding tears as he passed Hephaestion's tomb. The tale goes that he was saved by Perdiccas, who swore, by all the Gods and Hephaestion, that the God had appeared plainly to him as he was hunting, and charged him to bid Alexander spare Agathocles: his tears had meant neither scepticism nor mourning, but been merely a tribute to the friendship that was gone.

Flattery and slander had just then their opportunity in Alexander's emotional condition. In a siege, the assailants do not attempt a part of the defences that is high, precipitous, or solid; they direct all their force at some rotten, low, or neglected point, expecting to get in and effect the capture most easily so. Similarly the slanderer finds out where the soul is weak or corrupt or accessible, there makes his assault, there applies his engines, or effects an entry at a point where there are no defenders to mark his approach. Once in, he soon has all in flames; fire and sword and devasta-

tion clear out the previous occupants; how else should it be when a soul is captured and enslaved?

His siege-train includes deceit, falsehood, perjury, insinuation, effrontery, and a thousand other moral laxities. But the chief of them all is Flattery, the blood relation, the sister indeed, of Slander. No heart so high, so fenced with adamant, but Flattery will master it, with the aid of Slander undermining and sapping its foundations.

That is what goes on outside. But within there are traitorous parties working to the same end, stretching hands of help to the attack, opening the gates, and doing their utmost to bring the capture about. There are those ever-present human frailties, fickleness and satiety; there is the appetite for the surprising. We all delight, I cannot tell why, in whisperings and insinuations. I know people whose ears are as agreeably titillated with slander as their skin with a feather.

Supported by all these allies, the attack prevails; victory is hardly in doubt for a moment; there is no defence or resistance to the assault; the hearer surrenders without reluctance, and the slandered knows nothing of what is going on; as when a town is stormed by night, he has his throat cut in his sleep.

The most pitiful thing is when, all unconscious of how matters stand, he comes to his friend with a cheerful countenance, having nothing to be ashamed of, and talks and behaves as usual, just as if the toils were not all round him. Then if the other has any nobility or generous spirit of fair play in him, he gives vent to his anger and pours out his soul; after which he allows him to answer, and so finds out how he has been abused.

But if he is mean and ignoble, he receives him with a lip smile, while he is gnashing his teeth in covert rage, wrathfully brooding in the soul's dark depth, as the poet describes it. I know nothing so characteristic of a warped slavish nature as to bite the lip while you nurse your spite and cultivate your secret hatred, one thing in your heart and another on your tongue, playing with the gay looks of comedy a lamentable sinister tragedy. This is especially apt to occur, when the slander comes from one who is known for an old friend of the slandered. When that is the case, a man pays no attention to anything the victim or his apologists may say; that old friendship affords a sufficient presumption of truth; he forgets that estrangements, unknown to outsiders, constantly part the greatest friends; and sometimes a man will try to escape the consequences of his own faults by attributing similar ones to his neighbour and getting his denunciation in first. It may be taken, indeed, that no one will venture to slander an enemy; that is too unconvincing; the motive is so obvious. It is the supposed friend that is the most promising object, the idea being to give your hearer absolute proof of your devotion to him by sacrificing your dearest to his interests.

It must be added that there are persons who, if they subsequently learn that they have condemned a friend in error, are too much ashamed of that error to receive or look him in the face again; you might suppose the discovery of his innocence was a personal injury to them.

It is not, then, too much to say that life is made miserable by these lightly and incuriously credited slanders. Antea said to Proetus, after she had solicited and been scorned by Bellerophon;

Die thou the death, if thou slay not the man
That so would have enforc'd my chastity!

By the machinations of this lascivious woman, the young man came near perishing in his combat with the Chimera, as the penalty for continence and loyalty to his host. And Phaedra, who made a similar charge against her stepson, succeeded in bringing down upon Hippolytus a father's curse, though God knows how innocent he was.

"Ah, yes," I fancy someone objecting; "but the traducer sometimes deserves credit, being known for a just and a wise man; then he ought to be listened to, as one incapable of villany." What? was there ever a juster man than Aristides? yet he led the opposition to Themistocles and incited the people against him, pricked by the same political ambition as he. Aristides was a just man in all other relations; but he was human, he had a gall, he was open to likes and dislikes.

And if the story of Palamedes is true, the wisest of the Greeks, a great man in other respects too, stands convicted of hatching that insidious plot;¹ the ties that bind kinsmen, friends, and comrades in danger, had to yield to jealousy. To be a man is to be subject to this temptation.

It is superfluous to refer to Socrates, misrepresented to the Athenians as an impious plotter, to Themistocles or Miltiades, suspected after all their victories of betraying Greece; such examples are innumerable, and most of them familiar.

What, then, should a man of sense do, when he finds one friend's virtue pitted against another's truth? Why, surely, learn from Homer's parable of the Sirens; he advises sailing past these ear-charmers; we should stuff up our ears; we should not open them freely to the prejudiced, but station there a competent hall-porter in the shape of Judgement, who shall inspect every vocal visitor, and take it on himself to admit the worthy, but shut the door in the face of others. How absurd to have such an official at our house door, and leave our ears and understandings open to intrusion!

So, when any one comes to you with a tale, examine it on its merits, regardless of the informant's age, general conduct, or skill in speech. The more plausible he is, the greater need of care. Never trust another's judgement — it may be in reality only his dislike — but reserve the inquiry to yourself; let envy, if such it was, recoil upon the backbiter, your trial of the two men's characters be an open one, and your award of contempt and approval deliberate. To award them earlier, carried away by the first word of slander — why, God bless me, how puerile and mean and iniquitous it all is!

And the cause of it, as we started with saying, is ignorance, and the mystery that conceals men's characters. Would some God unveil all lives to us, Slander would retire discomfited to the bottomless pit; for the illumination of truth would be over all.

¹ Odysseus