

THE ACCOUNT OF THE LAWS AND CUSTOMS OF THE LACEDAEMONIANS.*

1. It was a singular instance of the wisdom of this nation, in that they took the greatest care they could, by an early sober education, to instil into their youth the principles of virtue and good manners, that so, by a constant succession of prudent and valiant men, they might the better provide for the honor and security of their state, and lay in the minds of every one a solid and good foundation of love and friendship, of prudence and knowledge, of temperance and frugality, of courage and resolution. And therefore their great lawgiver thought it necessary for the ends of government to institute several distinct societies and conventions of the people; amongst which was that of their solemn and public living together at one table, where their custom was to admit their youth into the conversation of their wise and elderly men, that so by daily eating and drinking with them they might insensibly, as it were, be trained up to a right knowledge of themselves, to a just submission to their superiors, and to the learning of whatever might conduce to the reputation of their laws and the interest of their country. For here they were taught all the wholesome rules of discipline, and daily instructed how to de-

* This is not a translation, but rather an essay by Mr. Pulleyn based upon the text of Plutarch's brief notes on the customs of the Lacedaemonians. It is therefore reprinted without essential changes. The sections of the original are marked whenever this is possible. (G.)

mean themselves from the example and practice of their great ones ; and though they did not at this public meeting confine themselves to set and grave discourses concerning the civil government, but allowed themselves a larger freedom, by mingling sometimes with their politics the easy and familiar entertainments of mirth and satire, yet this was ever done with the greatest modesty and discretion, not so much to expose the person of any one, as to reprove the fault he had committed. Whatever was transacted at these stated and common feasts was to be locked up in every one's breast with the greatest silence and secrecy, insomuch as the eldest among them at these assemblies, pointing to the door, acquainted him who entered the room that nothing of what was done or spoken there was to be talked of afterwards.

2. At all these public meetings they used a great deal of moderation, they being designed only for schools of temperance and modesty, not for luxury and indecency ; their chief dish and only delicacy being a sort of pottage (called by them their black broth, and made of some little pieces of flesh, with a small quantity of blood, salt, and vinegar), and this the more ancient among them generally preferred to any sort of meat whatsoever, as the more pleasing entertainment and of a more substantial nourishment. The younger sort contented themselves with flesh and other ordinary provisions, without tasting of this dish, which was reserved only for the old men. It is reported of Dionysius, the Sicilian tyrant, that having heard of the great fame and commendation of this broth, he hired a certain cook of Lacedaemon, who was thoroughly skilled in the make and composition of it, to furnish his table every day with so great and curious a dainty ; and that he might have it in the greatest perfection, enjoined him to spare no cost in the making it agreeable and pleasant to his palate. But it seems the end answered not the pains he took in it ; for

after all his care and niceness, the king, as soon as he had tasted of it, found it both fulsome and nauseous to his stomach, and spitting it out with great distaste, as if he had taken down a vomit, sufficiently expressed his disapprobation of it. But the cook, not discouraged at this dislike of his master, told the tyrant that he humbly conceived the reason of this disagreeableness to him was not in the pottage, but rather in himself, who had not prepared his body for such food according to the Laconic mode and custom. For hard labors and long exercises and moderate abstinence (the best preparatives to a good and healthy appetite) and frequent bathings in the river Eurotas were the only necessities for a right relish and understanding of the excellency of this entertainment.

3. 'Tis true, their constant diet was very mean and sparing; not what might pamper their bodies or make their minds soft and delicate, but such only as would barely serve to supply the common necessities of nature. This they accustomed themselves to, that so they might become sober and governable, active and bold in the defence of their country; they accounting only such men serviceable to the state, who could best endure the extremes of hunger and cold, and with cheerfulness and vigor run through the fatigues of labor and the difficulties of hardship. Those who could fast longest after a slender meal, and with the least provision satisfy their appetites, were esteemed the most frugal and temperate, and most sprightly and healthful, the most comely and well proportioned; nature, through such a temperance and moderation of diet, not suffering the constitution to run out into an unwieldy bulk or greatness of body (the usual consequence of full tables and too much ease), but rather rendering it thereby nervous and sinewy, of a just and equal growth, and consolidating and knitting together all the several parts and members of it. A very little drink did serve their turn, who never drank

but when an extreme thirst provoked them to it; for at all their common entertainments they studied the greatest measures of sobriety, and took care they should be deprived of all kinds of computations whatsoever. And at night when they returned home, they went cheerfully to their sleep, without the assistance of any light to direct them to their lodging; that being prohibited them as an indecent thing, the better to accustom them to travel in the dark, without any sense of fear or apprehensions of danger.

4. They never applied their minds to any kind of learning, further than what was necessary for use and service; nature indeed having made them more fit for the purposes of war than for the improvements of knowledge. And therefore for speculative sciences and philosophic studies, they looked upon them as foreign to their business and unserviceable to their ends of living, and for this reason they would not tolerate them amongst them, nor suffer the professors of them to live within their government. They banished them their cities, as they did all sorts of strangers, esteeming them as things that did debase the true worth and excellency of virtue, which they made to consist only in manly actions and generous exercises, and not in vain disputations and empty notions. So that the whole of what their youth was instructed in was to learn obedience to the laws and injunctions of their governors, to endure with patience the greatest labors, and where they could not conquer, to die valiantly in the field. For this reason likewise it was, that all mechanic arts and trades, all vain and insignificant employments, such as regarded only curiosity or pleasure, were strictly prohibited them, as things that would make them degenerate into idleness and covetousness, would render them vain and effeminate, useless to themselves, and unserviceable to the state; and on this account it was that they would never suffer any scenes or

interludes, whether of comedy or tragedy, to be set up among them, lest there should be any encouragement given to speak or act any thing that might savor of contempt or contumely against their laws and government, it being customary for the stage to assume an indecent liberty of taxing the one with faults and the other with imperfections.

5. As to their apparel, they were as thinly clad as they were dieted, never exceeding one garment, which they wore for the space of a whole year. And this they did, the better to inure them to hardship and to bear up against all the injuries of the weather, that so the extremities of heat and cold should have no influence at all upon their constitution. They were as regardless of their selves as they were negligent of their clothes, denying themselves (unless it were at some stated time of the year) the use of ointments and bathings to keep them clean and sweet, as too expensive and signs of a too soft and delicate temper of body.

6. Their youth, as they were instructed and ate in public together, so at night slept in distinct companies in one common chamber, and on no other beds than what were made of reeds, which they had gathered out of the river Eurotas, near the banks of which they grew. This was the only accommodation they had in the summer, but in winter they mingled with the reeds a certain soft and downy thistle, having much more of heat and warmth in it than the other.

7. It was freely allowed them to place an ardent affection upon those whose excellent endowments recommended them to the love and consideration of any one; but then this was always done with the greatest innocency and modesty, and every way becoming the strictest rules and measures of virtue, it being accounted a base and dishonorable passion in any one to love the body and not the

mind, as those did who in their young men preferred the beauty of the one before the excellency of the other. Chaste thoughts and modest discourses were the usual entertainments of their loves ; and if any one was accused at any time either of wanton actions or impure discourse, it was esteemed by all so infamous a thing, that the stains it left upon his reputation could never be wiped out during his whole life.

8. So strict and severe was the education of their youth, that whenever they were met with in the streets by your grave and elderly persons, they underwent a close examination ; it being their custom to enquire of them upon what business and whither they were going, and if they did not give them a direct and true answer to the question demanded of them, but shamed them with some idle story or false pretence, they never escaped without a rigorous censure and sharp correction. And this they did to prevent their youth from stealing abroad upon any idle or bad design, that so, through the uneasy fears of meeting these grave examiners, and the impossibility of escaping punishment upon their false account and representations of things, they might be kept within due compass, and do nothing that might entrench upon truth or offend against the rules of virtue. Nor was it expected only from their superiors to censure and admonish them upon any miscarriage or indecency whatsoever, but it was strictly required of them under a severe penalty ; for he who did not reprove a fault that was committed in his presence, and showed not his just resentments of it by a verbal correction, was adjudged equally culpable with the guilty, and obnoxious to the same punishment. For they could not imagine that person had a serious regard for the honor of their laws and the reputation of their government, who could carelessly pass by any immorality and patiently see the least corruption of good manners in their youth ; by which means they took

away all occasions of fondness, partiality, and indulgence in the aged, and all presumption, irreverence, and disobedience, and especially all impatience of reproof, in the younger sort. For not to endure the reprehension of their superiors in such cases was highly disgraceful to them, and ever interpreted as an open renunciation of their authority, and a downright opposing of the justice of their proceedings.

9. Besides, when any was surprised in the commission of some notorious offence, he was presently sentenced to walk round a certain altar in the city, and publicly to shame himself by singing an ingenious satire, composed by himself, upon the crime and folly he had been guilty of, that so the punishment might be inflicted by the same hand which had contracted the guilt.

10. Their children were brought up in a strict obedience to their parents, and taught from their infancy to pay a profound reverence to all their dictates and commands. And no less were they enjoined to show an awful regard and observance to all their superiors in age and authority, so as to rise up before the hoary head, and to honor the face of the old man, to give him the way when they met him in the streets, and to stand still and remain silent till he was passed by; insomuch as it was indulged them, as a peculiar privilege due to their age and wisdom, not only to have a paternal authority over their own children, servants, and estates, but over their neighbors too, as if they were a part of their own family and propriety; that so in general there might be a mutual care, and an united interest, zealously carried on betwixt them for the private good of every one in particular, as well as for the public good of the communities they lived in. By this means they never wanted faithful counsellors to assist with good advice in all their concerns, nor hearty friends to prosecute each other's interest as it were their own; by this means they never wanted

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