

PLUTARCH'S MORALS.

THE BANQUET OF THE SEVEN WISE MEN.

THE SEVEN, — SOLON, BIAS, THALES, ANACHARSIS, CLEOBULUS, PITTACUS, CHILO.*
NILOXENUS, EUMETIS, ALEXIDEMUS, PERIANDER, ARDALUS, ESOP, CLEODEMUS, MNESIPHILUS, CHERSIAS, GORGIAS, DIOCLES.

DIOCLES TO NICARCHUS.

1. No wonder, my friend Nicarchus, to find old truths so disguised, and the words and actions of men so grossly misrepresented and lamely delivered, seeing people are so disposed to give ear and credit to fictions of yesterday's standing. For there were not merely seven present at that feast, as you were informed; there were more than double the number. I was there myself in person and familiarly acquainted with Periander (my art had gained me his acquaintance); and Thales boarded at my house, at the request and upon the recommendation of Periander. Whoever then gave you that account of our feast did it very badly; it is plain he did it upon hearsay, and that he was not there among us. Now, since we are together and at leisure, and possibly we may not live to find an opportunity so convenient another time, I will (seeing you desire it) give you a faithful account of the whole proceedings at that meeting.

* See Section 7, where the form of the dialogue shows that Plutarch counted Anacharsis among the Seven, and left out Periander. (G.)

2. Periander had prepared a dinner for us, not in the town, but in a dining-hall at Lechaeum which stands close to the temple of Venus, to whom there was a sacrifice that day. For having neglected the duty ever since his mother died for love, he was resolved now to atone for the omission, being warned so to do by the dreams of Melissa. In order thereunto, there was provided a rich chariot for every one of the guests. It was summer-time, and every part of the way quite to the seaside was hardly passable, by reason of throngs of people and whole clouds of dust. As soon as Thales espied the chariot waiting at the door, he smilingly discharged it, and we walked through the fields to avoid the press and noise. There was in our company a third person, Niloxenus a Naucratian, an eminent man, who was very intimately acquainted with Solon and Thales in Egypt; he had a message to deliver to Bias, and a letter sealed, the contents whereof he knew not; only he guessed it contained a second question to be resolved by Bias, and in case Bias undertook not to answer it, he had in commission to impart it to the wisest men in Greece. What a fortune is this (quoth Niloxenus) to find you all together! This paper (showing it us) I am bringing to the banquet. Thales replied, after his wonted smiling way, If it contains any hard question, away with it to Priene. Bias will resolve it with the same readiness he did your former problem. What problem was that? quoth he. Why, saith Thales, a certain person sent him a beast for sacrifice with this command, that he should return him that part of his flesh which was best and worst; our philosopher very gravely and wisely pulled out the tongue of the beast, and sent it to the donor; — which single act procured him the name and reputation of a very wise man. It was not this act alone that advanced him in the estimation of the world, quoth Niloxenus; but he joyfully embraces what you so

carefully shun, the acquaintance and friendship of kings and great men; and whereas he honors you for divers great accomplishments, he particularly admires you for this invention, that with little labor and no help of any mathematical instrument you took so truly the height of one of the pyramids; for fixing your staff erect at the point of the shadow which the pyramid cast, two triangles being thus made by the tangent rays of the sun, you demonstrated that what proportion one shadow had to the other, such the pyramid bore to the stick.

But, as I said, you are accused of being a hater of kings, and certain back friends of yours have presented Amasis with a paper of yours stuffed with sentences reproachful to majesty; as for instance, being at a certain time asked by Molpagoras the Ionian, what the most absurd thing was you had observed in your notice, you replied, An old king. Another time, in a dispute that happened in your company about the nature of beasts, you affirmed that of wild beasts, a king, of tame, a flatterer was the worst. Such apophthegms must needs be unacceptable to kings, who pretend there is vast difference between them and tyrants. This was Pittacus's reply to Myrsilus, and it was spoken in jest, quoth Thales; nor was it an old king I said I should marvel at, but an old pilot. In this mistake, however, I am much of the youth's mind who, throwing a stone at a bitch, hit his stepmother, adding, Not so bad. I therefore esteemed Solon a very wise and good man, when I understood he refused empire; and if Pittacus had not taken upon himself a monarchy, he had never exclaimed, O ye Gods! how hard a matter it is to be good! And Periander, however he seems to be sick of his father's disease, is yet to be commended that he gives ear to wholesome discourses and converses only with wise and good men, rejecting the advice of Thrasybulus my countryman, who would have persuaded him to chop off the heads of his nobility. For

a prince that chooses rather to govern slaves than freemen is like a foolish farmer, who throws his wheat and barley in the streets, to fill his barns with swarms of locusts and whole cages of birds. For government has one good thing to make amends for the many evils attending it, namely, honor and glory, provided the ruler rules good men because he is better than they, and great men seeming to be greater than they. But he that having ascended the throne minds only his own interest and ease, remitting all care and concern for the welfare of the subject, is fitter to tend sheep or to drive horses or to feed cattle than to govern men of reason.

But this stranger (continues he) has engaged us in a deal of impertinent chat, for we have neglected to speak or offer any discourse suitable to the occasion and end of our meeting; for doubtless it becomes the guest, as well as the host, to make preparation beforehand. It is reported that the Sybarites used to invite their neighbors' wives a whole twelve-month before to their entertainments, that they might have convenient time to trim and adorn themselves; for my part, I am of opinion, that he who would feast as he should ought to allow himself more time for preparation than they, it being a more difficult matter to compose the mind into an agreeable temper than to fit one's clothes for the outward ornament of the body. For a prudent man comes not hither only to fill his belly, as if he were to fill a bottle, but to be sometimes grave and serious, sometimes pleasant, sometimes to listen to others, and sometimes to speak himself what may benefit or divert the company, if the meeting is intended for any good use or purpose. For if the victuals be not good, men may let them alone, or if the wine be bad, men may use water; but for a weak-headed, impertinent, unmannerly, shallow fellow-commoner there is no cure; he mars all the mirth and music, and spoils the best entertainment in the world.

And it will be no easy business to rid one's self of a sullen temper when once entertained; since we find divers men, affronted in their debauches, have yet remembered the provocation to their dying day, the spite remaining like a surfeit arising from wrong done or anger conceived in drinking wine. Wherefore Chilo did very well and wisely; for when he was invited yesterday, he would not promise to come till he had a particular given him of all their names who were to meet him. For, quoth he, if my business calls me to sea or I am pressed to serve my prince in his wars, there is a necessity upon me to rest contented with whatever company I fall into, though never so unsuitable to my quality or disagreeable to my nature and humor; but voluntarily and needlessly to associate myself with any riffraff rabble would ill become any man pretending to but common discretion.

The Egyptian skeleton which they brought into their feasts and exposed to the view of their guests, with this advice, that they should not in their merriment forget they would shortly be themselves such as that was, — though it was a sight not so acceptable (as may be supposed), — had yet this conveniency and use, to incite the spectators not to luxury and drunkenness but to mutual love and friendship, persuading them not to protract a life in itself short and uncertain by a tedious course of wickedness.

3. In discourses of this kind we spent our time by the way, and were now come to the house. Here Thales would not be washed, for he had but a while before anointed himself; wherefore he took a round to view the horse-race and the wrestling-place, and the grove upon the water-side, which was neatly trimmed and beautified by Periander; this he did, not so much to satisfy his own curiosity (for he seldom or never admired any thing he saw), but that he might not disoblige Periander or seem to overlook or despise the glory and magnificence of our host.

Of the rest every one, after he had anointed and washed himself, the servants introduced into a particular room, purposely fitted and prepared for the men ; they were guided thither through a porch, in which Anacharsis sat, and there was a certain young lady with him arranging his hair. This lady stepping forward to welcome Thales, he saluted her most courteously, and smiling said : Madam, make the stranger fair and pleasant, so that, being (as he is) the mildest man in the world, he may not be fearful and hideous for us to look on. When I was curious to enquire who this lady was whom Thales thus complimented, he said, Do you not yet know the wise and famous Eumetis ? — for so her father calls her, though others call her after her father's name Cleobulina. Doubtless, saith Niloxenus, they call her by this name to commend her judgment and wit, and her reach into the more abstruse and recondite part of learning ; for I have myself in Egypt seen and read some problems first started and discussed by her. Not so, saith Thales, for she plays with these as men do with cockal-bones, and encounters boldly all she meets, without study or premeditation ; she is a person of an admirable understanding, of a politic capacious mind, of a very obliging conversation, and one that by her rhetoric and the sweetness of her temper prevails upon her father to govern his subjects with the greatest mildness in the world. How popular she is appears, saith Niloxenus, plainly to any that observes her pleasant innocent garb. But pray, continues he, wherefore is it that she shows such tenderness and affection to Anacharsis ? Because, replied Thales, he is a temperate and learned man, who fully and freely makes known to her those mysterious ways of dieting and physicing the sick which are now in use among the Scythians ; and I doubt not she now coaxes and courts the old gentleman at the rate you see, taking this opportunity to discourse with him and learn something of him.

As we were come near the dining-room, Alexidemus the Milesian, a bastard son of Thrasybulus the Tyrant, met us. He seemed to be disturbed, and in an angry tone muttered to himself some words which we could not distinctly hear ; but espying Thales, and recovering himself out of his disorder, he complained how Periander had put an insufferable affront upon him. He would not permit me, saith he, to go to sea, though I earnestly importuned him, but he would press me to dine with him. And when I came as invited, he assigned me a seat unbecoming my person and character, Aeolians and islanders and others of inferior rank being placed above me ; whence it is easy to infer how meanly he thinks of my father, and it is undeniable how this affront put upon me rebounds disgracefully in my parent's face. Say you so ? quoth Thales, are you afraid lest the place lessen or diminish your honor and worth, as the Egyptians commonly hold the stars are magnified or lessened according to their higher or lower place and position ? And are you more foolish than that Spartan who, when the prefect of the music had appointed him to sit in the lowest seat in the choir, replied, This is prudently done, for this is the ready way to bring this seat into repute and esteem ? It is a frivolous consideration, where or below whom we sit ; and it is a wiser part to adapt ourselves to the judgment and humor of our right and left hand man and the rest of the company, that we may approve ourselves worthy of their friendship, when they find we take no pet at our host, but are rather pleased to be placed near such good company. And whosoever is disturbed upon the account of his place seems to be more angry with his neighbor than with his host, but certainly is very troublesome and nauseous to both.

These are fine words, and no more, quoth Alexidemus, for I observe you, the wisest of men, as ambitious as other men ; and having said thus, he passed by us doggedly and

END OF SAMPLE TEXT



The Complete Text can be found on our CD:
Primary Literary Sources For Ancient Literature
which can be purchased on our Website :
www.Brainfly.net

or

by sending **\$64.95** in check or money order to :
Brainfly Inc.
5100 Garfield Ave. #46
Sacramento CA 95841-3839

TEACHER'S DISCOUNT:

If you are a **TEACHER** you can take advantage of our teacher's discount. Click on **Teachers Discount** on our website (www.Brainfly.net) or **Send us \$55.95** and we will send you a full copy of *Primary Literary Sources For Ancient Literature* **AND** our *5000 Classics CD (a collection of over 5000 classic works of literature in electronic format (.txt))* plus our *Wholesale price list*.

If you have any suggestions such as books you would like to see added to the collection or if you would like our wholesale prices list please send us an email to:

webcomments@brainfly.net