

HOW TO KNOW A FLATTERER FROM A FRIEND.

TO ANTIOCHUS PHILOPAPPUS.

1. PLATO is of opinion that it is very pardonable in a man to acknowledge that he has any extraordinary passion for himself; and yet the humor is attended with this ill consequent, besides several others, that it renders us incapable of making a right judgment of ourselves. For our affections usually blind our discerning faculties, unless we have learned to raise them above the sordid level of things congenial and familiar to us, to those which are truly noble and excellent in themselves. And hence it is that we are so frequently exposed to the attempts of a parasite, under the disguise and vizard of a friend. For self-love, that grand flatterer within, willingly entertains another from without, who will but soothe up and second the man in the good opinions he has conceived of himself. For he who deservedly lies under the character of one that loves to be flattered is doubtless sufficiently fond of himself; and through abundance of complaisance to his own person, not only wishes but thinks himself master of all those perfections which may recommend him to others. And though indeed it be laudable enough to covet such accomplishments, yet is it altogether unsafe for any man to fancy them inherent in him.

Now, if truth be a ray of the divinity, as Plato says it is, and the source of all the good that derives upon either Gods or men, then certainly the flatterer must be looked

upon as a public enemy to all the Gods, and especially to Apollo; for he always acts counter to that celebrated oracle of his, Know thyself, endeavoring to make every man his own cheat, by keeping him ignorant of the good and ill qualities that are in him; whereupon the good never arrive at perfection, and the ill grow incorrigible.

2. Did flattery, indeed, as most other misfortunes do, generally or altogether wait on the debauched and ignoble part of mankind, the mischief were of less consequence, and might admit of an easier prevention. But, as worms breed most in sweet and tender woods, so usually the most obliging, the most brave and generous tempers readiliest receive and longest entertain the flattering insect that hangs and grows upon them. And since, to use Simonides's expression, it is not for persons of a narrow fortune, but for gentlemen of estates, to keep a good stable of horses; so never saw we flattery the attendant of the poor, the inglorious and inconsiderable plebeian, but of the grantees of the world, the distemper and bane of great families and affairs, the plague in kings' chambers, and the ruin of their kingdoms. Therefore it is a business of no small importance, and one which requires no ordinary circumspection, so to be able to know a flatterer in every shape he assumes, that the counterfeit resemblance some time or other bring not true friendship itself into suspicion and disrepute. For parasites, — like lice, which desert a dying man, whose palled and vapid blood can feed them no longer, — never intermix in dry and insipid business where there is nothing to be got; but prey upon a noble quarry, the ministers of state and potentates of the earth, and afterwards lousily shirk off, if the greatness of their fortune chance to leave them. But it will not be wisdom in us to stay till such fatal junctures, and then try the experiment, which will not only be useless but dangerous and hurtful; for it is a deplorable thing for a man to find himself then destitute

of friends, when he most wants them, and has no opportunity either of exchanging his false and faithless friend for a fast and honest one. And therefore we should rather try our friend, as we do our money, whether or not he be passable and current, before we need him. For it is not enough to discover the cheat to our cost, but we must so understand the flatterer, that he put no cheat upon us; otherwise we should act like those who must needs take poison to know its strength, and foolishly hazard their lives to inform their judgment. And as we cannot approve of this carelessness, so neither can we of that too scrupulous humor of those who, taking the measures of true friendship only from the bare honesty and usefulness of the man, immediately suspect a pleasant and easy conversation for a cheat. For a friend is not a dull tasteless thing, nor does the decorum of friendship consist in sourness and austerity of temper, but its very port and gravity is soft and amiable, —

Where Love and all the Graces do reside.*

For it is not only a comfort to the afflicted,

To enjoy the courtesy of his kindest friend,†

as Euripides speaks; but friendship extends itself to both fortunes, as well brightens and adorns prosperity as allays the sorrows that attend adversity. And as Evenus used to say that fire makes the best sauce, so friendship, wherewith God has seasoned the circumstances of our mortality, gives a relish to every condition, renders them all easy, sweet, and agreeable enough. And indeed, did not the laws of friendship admit of a little pleasantry and good humor, why should the parasite insinuate himself under that disguise? And yet he, as counterfeit gold imitates the brightness and lustre of the true, always puts on the easiness and freedom of a friend, is always pleasant and obliging, and ready to comply with the humor of his company. And therefore it

* Hesiod, *Theogony*, 64.

† Eurip. *Ion*, 732.

is no way reasonable either, to look upon every just character that is given us as a piece of flattery; for certainly a due and seasonable commendation is as much the duty of one friend to another as a pertinent and serious reprehension; nay indeed, a sour querulous temper is perfectly repugnant to the laws of friendship and conversation; whereas a man takes a chiding patiently from a friend who is as ready to praise his virtues as to animadvert upon his vices, willingly persuading himself that mere necessity obliged him to reprimand, whom kindness had first moved to commend.

3. Why then, some may say, it is infinitely difficult at this rate to distinguish a flatterer from a friend, since there is no apparent difference either betwixt the satisfaction they create or the praises they bestow. Nay, it is observable, that a parasite is frequently more obsequious and obliging than a friend himself. Well, the way then to discover the disparity? Why, I will tell you; if you would learn the character of a true subtle flatterer, who nicks his point *secundum artem*, you must not, with the vulgar, mistake those sordid smell-feasts and poor trencher-slaves for your men, who begin to prate as soon as they have washed their hands in order to dinner, as one says of them, and ere they are well warmed with a good cut of the first dish and a glass of wine, betray the narrow soul that acts them by the nauseous and fulsome buffoonery they vent at table. For sure it needed no great sagacity to detect the flattery of Melanthius, the parasite of Alexander of Pherae, who, being asked how his master was murdered, made answer, With a thrust which went in at his side, but into my belly. Nor must we, again, confine our notions of flatterers to those sharpening fellows who ply about rich men's tables, whom neither fire nor sword nor porter can keep from supper; nor yet to such as were those female parasites of Cyprus, who going into

Syria were nick-named Steps, because they cringed so to the great ladies of that country that they mounted their chariots on their backs.

4. Well, but after all, who is this flatterer then, whom we ought so industriously to avoid?

I answer: He who neither professes nor seems to flatter; who never haunts your kitchen, is never observed to watch the dial that he may nick your supper-time; who won't drink to excess, but will keep his brains about him; who is prying and inquisitive, would mix in your business, and wind himself into your secrets: in short, he who acts the friend, not with the air of a comedian or a satirist, but with the port and gravity of a tragedian. For, as Plato says, It is the height of injustice to appear just and be really a knave. So are we to look upon those flatterers as most dangerous who walk not barefaced but in disguise, who make no sport but mind their business; for these often personate the true and sincere friend so exactly, that it is enough to make him fall under the like suspicion of a cheat, unless we be extremely curious in remarking the difference betwixt them. It is storied of Gobryas (one of the Persian nobility, who joined with Darius against the Magi), that he pursued one of them into a dark room, and there fell upon him; during the scuffle Darius came in and drew upon the enemy, but durst not push at him, lest perhaps he might wound his confederate Gobryas with the thrust; whereupon Gobryas bade him, rather than fail, run both through together. But since we can by no means admit of that vulgar saying, Let my friend perish, so my enemy perish with him, but had rather still endeavor at the discovery of a parasite from a friend, notwithstanding the nearness of the resemblance, we ought to use our utmost care, lest at any time we indifferently reject the good with the bad, or unadvisedly retain the bad with the good, the friend and flat-

terer together. For as those wild grains which usually grow up with wheat, and are of the same figure and bigness with it, are not easily winnowed from it, — for they either cannot pass through the holes of the sieve, if narrow, or pass together with the wheat, if larger, — so is it infinitely difficult to distinguish flattery from friendship, because the one so exquisitely mixes with all the passions, humors, interests, and inclinations of the other.

5. Now because the enjoyment of a friend is attended with the greatest satisfaction incident to humanity, therefore the flatterer always endeavors to entrap us by rendering his conversation highly pleasant and agreeable. Again, because all acts of kindness and mutual beneficence are the constant attendants upon true friendship (on which account we usually say, A friend is more necessary than fire or water), therefore the flatterer is ready upon every occasion to obtrude his service upon you, and will with an indefatigable bustle and zeal seek to oblige you if he can.

In the next place, the parasite observes that all true friendship takes its origin from a concurrence of like humors and inclinations, and that the same passions, the same aversions and desires, are the first cement of a true and lasting friendship. He therefore composes his nature, like unformed matter, striving to fit and adapt it by imitation to the person on whom he designs, that it may be pliant and yielding to any impression that he shall think fit to stamp upon it; and, in fine, he so neatly resembles the original, that one would swear, —

Sure thou the very Achilles art, and not his son.

But the most exquisite fineness of a flatterer consists in his imitation of that freedom of discourse which friends particularly use in mutually reprehending each other. For finding that men usually take it for what it really is, the natural language of friendship, as peculiar to it as certain

notes or voices are to certain animals, and that, on the contrary, a shy sheepish reservedness looks both rude and unfriendly, he lets not even this proper character of a friend escape his imitation. But as skilful cooks use to correct luscious meats with sharp and poignant sauce, that they may not be so apt to overcharge the stomach; so he seasons his flattery now and then with a little smartness and severity, lest the fulsomeness of repeated dissimulation should pall and cloy the company. And yet his reprehensions always carry something in them that looks not true and genuine; he seems to do it, but with a kind of a sneering and grinning countenance at the best; and though his reproofs may possibly tickle the ear, yet they never strike effectually upon the heart. On these accounts then it is as difficult to discern a flatterer from a friend, as to know those animals again which always wear the livery of the last thing they touch upon. And therefore, since he puts so easily upon us under the disguise and appearance of a friend, it will be our business at present to unmask the hypocrite, and show him in other men's shapes and colors, as Plato speaks, since he has none properly his own.

6. Well then, let us enquire regularly into this affair. We have already asserted, that friendship generally takes its rise from a conformity of tempers and dispositions, whereby different persons come to have the same taste of the like humors, customs, studies, exercises, and employs, as these following verses import:—

Old men with old, and boys with boys agree;
 And women's clack with women's company.
 Men that are crazy, full of sores and pain,
 Love to diseased persons to complain.
 And they who labor under adverse fate,
 Tell their sad stories to th' unfortunate.

The flatterer then, observing how congenial it is to our natures to delight in the conversation of those who are, as

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