

HERAKLES'S CHOICE

from Xenophon's Memorabilia (attributed to Prodicus)

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“When Herakles was emerging from boyhood into the bloom of youth, having reached that season in which the young man, now standing upon the verge of independence, shows plainly whether he will enter upon the path of virtue or of vice, he went forth into a quiet place, and sat debating with himself which of those two paths he should pursue; and as he there sat musing, there appeared to him two women of great stature which drew nigh to him. The one was fair to look upon, frank and free by gift of nature, her limbs adorned with purity and her eyes with bashfulness; sobriety set the rhythm of her gait, and she was clad in white apparel. The other was of a different type; the fleshy softness of her limbs betrayed her nurture, while the complexion of her skin was embellished that she might appear whiter and rosier than she really was, and her figure that she might seem taller than nature made her; she stared with wide-open eyes, and the raiment wherewith she was clad served but to reveal the ripeness of her bloom. With frequent glances she surveyed her person, or looked to see if others noticed her; while ever and anon she fixed her gaze upon the shadow of herself intently.

“Now when these two had drawn nearer to Herakles, she who was first named advanced at an even pace towards him, but the other, in her eagerness to outstrip her, ran forward to the youth, exclaiming, ‘I see you, Herakles, in doubt and difficulty what path of life to choose; make me your friend, and I will lead you to the pleasantest road and easiest. This I promise you: you shall taste all of life’s sweets and escape all bitters. In the first place, you shall not trouble your brain with war or business; other topics shall engage your mind; your only speculation, what meat or drink you shall find agreeable to your palate; what delight of ear or eye; what pleasure of smell or touch; what darling lover’s intercourse shall most enrapture you; how you shall pillow your limbs in softest slumber; how cull each individual pleasure without alloy of pain; and if ever the suspicion steal upon you that the stream of joys will one day dwindle, trust me I will not lead you where you shall replenish the store by toil of body and trouble of soul. No! Others shall labour, but you shall reap the fruit of their labours; you shall withhold your hand from nought which shall bring you gain. For to all my followers I give authority and power to help themselves freely from every side.’

“Herakles hearing these words made answer: ‘What, O lady, is the name you bear?’ To which she: ‘Know that my friends call me Happiness, but they that hate me have their own nicknames for me, Vice and Naughtiness.’

“But just then the other of those fair women approached and spoke: ‘Herakles, I too am come to you, seeing that your parents are well known to me, and in your nurture I have gauged your nature; wherefore I entertain good hope that if you choose the path

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which leads to me, you shall greatly bestir yourself to be the doer of many a doughty deed of noble emprise; and that I too shall be held in even higher honour for your sake, lit with the lustre shed by valorous deeds. I will not cheat you with preludings of pleasure, but I will relate to you the things that are according to the ordinances of God in very truth. Know then that among things that are lovely and of good report, not one have the gods bestowed upon mortal man apart from toil and pains. Would you obtain the favour of the gods, then must you pay these same gods service; would you be loved by your friends, you must benefit these friends; do you desire to be honoured by the state, you must give the state your aid; do you claim admiration for your virtue from all Hellas, you must strive to do some good to Hellas; do you wish earth to yield her fruits to you abundantly, to earth must you pay your court; do you seek to amass riches from your flocks and herds, on them must you bestow your labour; or is it your ambition to be potent as a warrior, able to save your friends and to subdue your foes, then must you learn the arts of war from those who have the knowledge, and practise their application in the field when learned; or would you e'en be powerful of limb and body, then must you habituate limbs and body to obey the mind, and exercise yourself with toil and sweat.'

"At this point," as Prodicus relates, "Vice broke in exclaiming: 'See you, Herakles, how hard and long the road is by which yonder woman would escort you to her festal joys. But I will guide you by a short and easy road to happiness.'

"Then spoke Virtue: 'Nay, wretched one, what good thing hast thou? or what sweet thing art thou acquainted with — that wilt stir neither hand nor foot to gain it? Thou, that mayest not even await the desire of pleasure, but, or ever that desire springs up, art already satiated: eating before thou hungerest, and drinking before thou thirstest; who to eke out an appetite must invent an army of cooks and confectioners; and to whet thy thirst must lay down costliest wines, and run up and down in search of ice in summer-time; to help thy slumbers soft coverlets suffice not, but couches and feather-beds must be prepared thee and rockers to rock thee to rest; since desire for sleep in thy case springs not from toil but from vacuity and nothing in the world to do. Even the natural appetite of love thou forcest prematurely by every means thou mayest devise, confounding the sexes in thy service. Thus thou educatest thy friends: with insult in the night season and drowse of slumber during the precious hours of the day. Immortal, thou art cast forth from the company of gods, and by good men art dishonoured: that sweetest sound of all, the voice of praise, has never thrilled thine ears; and the fairest of all fair visions is hidden from thine eyes that have never beheld one bounteous deed wrought by thine own hand. If thou openest thy lips in speech, who will believe thy words? If thou hast need of ought, none shall satisfy thee. What sane man will venture to join thy rabble rout? Ill indeed are thy revellers to look upon, young men impotent of body, and old men witless in mind: in the heyday of life they batten in sleek idleness, and wearily do they drag through an age of wrinkled wretchedness: and why? they blush with shame at the thought of deeds done in the past, and groan for weariness at what is left to do. During their youth they ran riot through their sweet things, and laid up for themselves large store of bitterness against the time of eld. But my companionship is with the gods; and with the good among

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men my conversation; no bounteous deed, divine or human, is wrought without my aid. Therefore am I honoured in Heaven pre-eminently, and upon earth among men whose right it is to honour me; as a beloved fellow-worker of all craftsmen; a faithful guardian of house and lands, whom the owners bless; a kindly helpmeet of servants; a brave assistant in the labours of peace; an unflinching ally in the deeds of war; a sharer in all friendships indispensable. To my friends is given an enjoyment of meats and drinks, which is sweet in itself and devoid of trouble, in that they can endure until desire ripens, and sleep more delicious visits them than those who toil not. Yet they are not pained to part with it; nor for the sake of slumber do they let slip the performance of their duties. Among my followers the youth delights in the praises of his elders, and the old man glories in the honour of the young; with joy they call to memory their deeds of old, and in to-day's well-doing are well pleased. For my sake are they dear in the sight of God, beloved of their friends and honoured by the country of their birth. When the appointed goal is reached they lie not down in oblivion with dishonour, but bloom afresh — their praise resounded on the lips of men for ever. Toils like these, O son of noble parents, Herakles, it is yours to meet with, and having endured, to enter into the heritage assured you of transcendent happiness.”