

PORPHYRY THE PHILOSOPHER TO MARCELLA

1. I chose thee as my wife, Marcella, though thou wert the mother of five daughters and two sons, some of whom were still little children, and the others approaching a marriageable age; nor was I deterred by the multitude of things which would be needful for their maintenance. And it was not for the sake of having children that I wedded thee, deeming that the lovers of true wisdom were my children, and that thy children too would be mine, if ever these should attain to right philosophy, when educated by us. Nor yet was it because a superfluity of riches had fallen either to thy lot or mine. For such necessaries as are ours must suffice us who are poor. Neither did I expect that thou wouldst afford me any ease through thy ministrations as I advanced in years, for thy frame is delicate, and more in need of care from others than fitted to succour or watch over them. Nor yet did I desire other housewifely care from thee, nor sought I after honour and praise from those who would not willingly have undertaken such a burden for the mere sake of doing good. Nay, it was far otherwise, for through the folly of thy fellow-citizens, and their envy towards thee and thine, I encountered much ill-speaking, and contrary to all expectation I fell into danger of death at their hands on your behalf.

2. For none of these causes did I choose another to be partner of my life, but there was a twofold and reasonable cause that determined me. One part was that I deemed I should thus propitiate the gods of generation; just as Sokrates in his prison chose to compose popular music, for the sake of safety in his departure from life, instead of pursuing his customary labours in philosophy, so did I strive to propitiate the divinities who preside over this tragi-comedy of ours, and shrank not from chanting in all willingness the marriage hymn, though I took as my lot thy numerous children, and thy straitened circumstances, and the malice of evil-speakers. Nor *were* there lacking any of those passions usually connected with a play—jealousy, hatred, laughter, quarrelling and anger; this alone excepted, that it was not with a view to ourselves but for the sake of others that we enacted this spectacle in honour of the gods.

3. Another worthier reason, in nowise resembling that commonplace one, was that I admired thee because thy disposition was suited to true philosophy; and when thou wast bereaved of thy husband, a man dear to me, I deemed it not fitting to leave thee without a helpmeet and wise protector suited to thy character. Wherefore I drove away all who were minded to use insult under false pretence, and I endured foolish contumely, and bore in patience with the plots laid against me, and strove, as far as in my power lay, to deliver thee from all who tried to lord it over thee. I recalled thee also to thy proper mode of life, and gave thee a share in philosophy, pointing out to thee a doctrine that should guide thy life. And who could be a more faithful witness to me than thyself? for I should deem it shame to equivocate to thee, or conceal aught of mine from thee, or to withhold from thee (who honourest truth above all things, and therefore didst deem our marriage a gift from Heaven) a truthful relation from beginning to end of all that I have done with respect to and during our union.

[Sections 4 and 5: Porphyry discusses the fact that he has to go away on a mission for the Greeks and that Marcella was unable to accompany him because she needed to look after her daughters. He urges Marcella to continue pursuing philosophy (which he calls ‘your only unfailing life-line’) in his absence and not to give up or become overwhelmed by the

current difficulties she faces in relation to external circumstances. He reminds her that the gods have not forgotten us and urges her to practise the kind of life she expects to lead by making use of the adverse circumstances she faces].

6. Now thou mayest console thyself for the absence of him who sustains thy soul, and is to thee father, husband, teacher, and kindred, yea, if thou wilt, even fatherland, though this seems to offer a reasonable ground for unhappiness, by placing before thee as arbiter not feeling but reason. In the first place consider that, as I have said before, it is impossible that those who desire to be mindful of their return, should accomplish their journey home from this terrestrial exile pleasantly and easily, as through some smooth plain. For no two things can be more entirely opposed to one another than a life of pleasure and ease, and the ascent to the gods. As the summits of mountains cannot be reached without danger and toil, so it is not possible to emerge from the inmost depths of the body through pleasure and ease which drag men down to the body. For 'tis by anxious thought that we reach the road, and by recollection of our fall. Even if we encounter difficulties in our way, hardship is natural to the ascent, for it is given to the gods alone to lead an easy life. But ease is most dangerous for souls which have fallen to this earthly life, making us forgetful in the pursuit of alien things, and bringing on a state of deep slumber, if we fall asleep beguiled by alluring visions.

7. Now there are some chains that are of very heavy gold, but, because of their beauty, they persuaded women who in their folly do not perceive the weight, that they contribute to ornament, and thus got them to bear fetters easily. But other fetters which are of iron compelled them to a knowledge of their sins, and by pain forced them to repent and seek release from the weight; while escape from the golden imprisonment, through the delight felt in it, often causes grievous woe. Whence it has seemed to men of wisdom that labours conduce to virtue more than do pleasures. And to toil is better for man, aye and for woman too, than to let the soul be puffed up and enervated by pleasure. For labour must lead the way to every fair possession, and he must toil who is eager to attain virtue. Thou knowest that Herakles and the Dioskuri, and Asklepios and all other children of the gods, through toil and steadfastness accomplished the blessed journey to heaven. For it is not those who live a life of pleasure that make the ascent to the gods, but rather those who have nobly learnt to endure the greatest misfortunes.

8. I know full well that there could be no greater contest than that which now lies before thee, since thou thinkest that in me thou wilt lose the path of safety and the guide therein. Yet thy circumstances are not altogether unendurable, if thou cast from thee the unreasoning distress of mind which springs from the feelings, and deem it no trivial matter to remember those words by which thou wert with divine rites initiated into true philosophy, approving by thy deeds the fidelity with which they have been apprehended. For it is a man's actions that naturally afford demonstrations of his opinions, and whoever holds a belief must live in accordance with it, in order that he may himself be a faithful witness to his disciples of his words. What was it then that we learned from those men who possess the clearest knowledge to be found among mortals? Was it not this—that I am in reality not this person who can be touched or perceived by any of the senses, but that which is farthest removed from the body, the colourless and formless essence which can by no means be touched by the hands, but is grasped by the mind alone? And

it is not from outward things that we receive those principles which are implanted in us. We receive only the keynote as in a chorus, which recalls to our remembrance those commands we received from the god who gave them us ere we set forth on our wanderings.

9. Moreover is not every emotion of the soul most hostile to its safety? And is not want of education the mother of all the passions? Now education does not consist in the absorption of a large amount of knowledge, but in casting off the affections of the soul. The passions are the beginning of diseases. And vice is the disease of the soul; and every vice is disgraceful. And the disgraceful is opposed to the good. Now since the divine nature is good, it is impossible for it to consort with vice, since Plato says it is unlawful for the impure to approach the pure. Wherefore even now we need to purge away all our passions, and the sins that spring therefrom. Was it not this thou didst so much approve, reading as it were divine characters within thee, disclosed by my words? Is it not then absurd, though thou art persuaded that thou hast in thee the saving and the saved, the losing and the lost, wealth and poverty, father and husband and a guide to all true good, to pant after the mere shadow of a leader, as though thou hadst not within thyself a true leader, and all riches in thine own power? And these must thou lose and forfeit, if thou descend to the flesh, instead of turning towards that which saves and is saved.

10. As for my shadow and visible image, as thou wast not profited by their presence, so now their absence is not hurtful, if thou train thyself to escape from the body. And thou wouldst meet with me in all purity, and I should be most truly present and associated with thee, night and day, in purity and with the fairest kind of converse which can never be broken up, if thou wouldst practise entering into thyself, to collect together all the powers which the body has scattered and broken up into a multitude of parts unlike their former unity, to which concentration lent strength. Thou shouldst collect and combine into one the thoughts implanted within thee, endeavouring to isolate those that are confused, and to drag to light those that are enveloped in darkness. The divine Plato too made this his starting-point, summoning us away from the sensible to the intelligible. Also if thou wouldst remember, thou wouldst combine what thou hast heard, and recall it by memory, desiring to turn thy mind to discourses of this kind as to excellent counsellors, and afterwards practising in action what thou hast learnt, guarding it carefully, even amid thy labours.

11. Reason tells us that the Divine is present everywhere and in all men, but that only the mind of the wise man is sanctified as its temple, and God is best honoured by him who knows Him best. And this must naturally be the wise man alone, who in wisdom must honour the Divine, and in wisdom adorn for it a temple in his thought, honouring it with a living statue, the mind moulded in His image.....Now God is not in need of any one, and the wise man is in need of God alone. For no one could become good and noble, unless he knew the goodness and beauty which proceed from the Deity. Nor is any man unhappy, unless he has fitted up his soul as a dwelling-place for evil spirits. To a wise man God gives the authority of a god. And a man is purified by the knowledge of God, and issuing from God, he follows after righteousness.

12. Let God be at hand to behold and examine every act and deed and word. And let us consider Him the author of all our good deeds. But of evil we ourselves are the authors, since it is we who made choice of it, but God is without blame. Wherefore we should pray to God for that which is worthy of Him, and we should pray for what we could attain from none other. And we must pray that we may attain after our labours those things that are preceded by toil and virtue; for the prayer of the slothful is but vain speech. Neither ask of God what thou wilt not hold fast when thou hast attained it, since God's gifts cannot be taken from thee, and He will not give what thou wilt not hold fast. What thou wilt not require when thou art rid of the body, that despise, but practise thyself in that thou wilt need when thou art set free, calling on God to be thy helper. Thou wilt need none of those things which chance often gives and again takes away. Do not make any request before the fitting season, but only when God makes plain the right desire implanted by nature within thee.

13. Thus can God best be reflected, who cannot be seen by the body, nor yet by an impure soul darkened with vice. For purity is God's beauty, and His light is the life-giving flame of truth. Every vice is deceived by ignorance, and turned astray by wickedness. Wherefore desire and ask of God what is in accordance with His own will and nature, well assured that, inasmuch as a man longs after the body and the things of the body, in so far does he fail to know God, and is blind to the sight of God, even though all men should hold him as a god. Now the wise man, if known by only few, or, if thou wilt, unknown to all, yet is known by God. Let then thy mind follow after God and by likening itself unto Him reflect His image; let the soul follow the mind, and the body be subservient to the soul as far as may be, the pure body serving the pure soul. For if it be defiled by the emotions of the soul, the defilement reacts upon the soul itself.