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On the Firmness of the Wise Person

Lucius Annaeus Seneca

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Introduction

Seneca's *On the Firmness of the Wise Person* examines a famous Stoic paradox: the genuinely wise person cannot be injured or insulted. Addressed to his friend Annaeus Serenus and traditionally known by the Latin title *De Constantia Sapientis*, the dialogue does not deny that a wise person can be attacked, struck, dispossessed or publicly mocked. Its claim is more precise. External aggression cannot take away the moral good on which wisdom depends, while contemptuous words cannot force a person to adopt the low opinion expressed by someone else.

The work belongs to a group of dialogues connected with Serenus and is usually placed around the middle of Seneca's philosophical career. Serenus serves as an intelligent but sceptical interlocutor. He admires Cato yet finds it difficult to accept the language of Stoic invulnerability. His objections allow Seneca to distinguish bold philosophical claims from mere verbal exaggeration and to explain what Stoics mean when they call the wise person secure.

Cato the Younger supplies the work's central example. He is exposed to political defeat, physical humiliation and the collapse of the Roman Republic, but Seneca presents him as refusing to let public treatment determine his moral identity. The crowd may tear his clothing or cover him with insults, yet its behaviour reveals its own condition rather than diminishing his virtue. Cato's firmness illustrates the difference between being targeted and being inwardly defeated.

Sections V onward distinguish injury from insult. Injury is the more serious category and ordinarily involves loss, pain or injustice. Insult is connected with contempt and wounds those whose sense of worth depends upon social estimation. Seneca argues that the wise person cannot receive injury in the strict moral sense because the only true good is virtue, which another person's action cannot remove. The wise person cannot receive insult because another's contempt is not accepted as an authoritative judgement.

This does not make the body invulnerable or suffering imaginary. Seneca repeatedly acknowledges pain, illness, bereavement and physical assault. The Stoic argument concerns the classification of these experiences. They are unpleasant, difficult and often reasonably resisted, but they are not themselves moral degradation. A person is degraded by acting dishonourably, not simply by having something painful done to them.

The dialogue also analyses the psychology of insult. Mockery gains power when it confirms a fear about status, appearance or belonging. Anger then appears to defend dignity while actually handing judgement to the offender. Seneca compares many insults to the noise of children or disordered people: their words can be heard

without being treated as competent verdicts. The response is not forced cheerfulness but a refusal to let an unqualified judgement govern self-respect.

Humour and perspective become practical defences. Seneca recounts figures who answer mockery lightly or turn an attempted insult back upon its author without bitterness. Their composure denies the offender the emotional control being sought. Yet he also warns against unnecessary quarrels. Developing students should avoid situations in which pride is continually provoked until their philosophical convictions are strong enough to remain stable.

The work's ideal of the sage is deliberately demanding. Seneca anticipates the objection that such a person does not exist and replies that philosophy needs a visible standard towards which imperfect people can move. He does not require beginners to pretend they have already reached perfect security. The final section distinguishes the fully wise person from the person still making progress and offers practical preparation for unavoidable criticism and hostility.

Modern readers may reasonably resist language suggesting that a victim cannot be injured. Seneca's technical use of injury must therefore be kept clear. Legal, bodily and psychological harms remain real and may require protection or justice. His ethical claim is that wrongdoing cannot automatically make the target morally worse. Responsibility for the wrong remains with the aggressor, while the target retains a sphere of judgement and character that the aggressor cannot simply seize.

On the Firmness of the Wise Person is ultimately a study of moral independence. It asks where self-respect is located, how public judgement acquires power, and which goods remain secure when fortune becomes hostile. Seneca's answer is uncompromising: dignity grounded in virtue does not need an enemy's permission, and another person's misconduct need not become the governing force within one's own mind.

I.

I might truly say, Serenus, that there is as wide a difference between the Stoics and the other sects of philosophers as there is between men and women, since each class contributes an equal share to human society, but the one is born to command, the other to obey. The other philosophers deal with us gently and coaxingly, just as our accustomed family physicians usually do with our bodies, treating them not by the best and shortest method, but by that which we allow them to employ; whereas the Stoics adopt a manly course, and do not care about its appearing attractive to those who are entering upon it, but that it should as quickly as possible take us out of the world, and lead us to that lofty eminence which is so far beyond the scope of any missile weapon that it is above the reach of Fortune herself.

“But the way by which we are asked to climb is steep and uneven.” What then? Can heights be reached by a level path? Yet they are not so sheer and precipitous as some think. It is only the first part that has rocks and cliffs and no apparent outlet, just as many hills seen from a long way off appear abruptly steep and joined together, because the distance deceives our sight, and then, as we draw nearer, those very hills which our mistaken eyes had made into one gradually unfold themselves, those parts which seemed precipitous from afar assume a gently sloping outline. When just now mention was made of Marcus Cato, you whose mind revolts at injustice were indignant at Cato’s own age having so little understood him, at its having allotted a place below Vatinius to one who towered above both Caesar and Pompeius; it seemed shameful to you, that when he spoke against some law in the Forum his toga was torn from him, and that he was hustled through the hands of a mutinous mob from the Rostra as far as the arch of Fabius, enduring all the bad language, spitting, and other insults of the frantic rabble.

II.

I then answered, that you had good cause to be anxious on behalf of the commonwealth, which Publius Clodius on the one side, Vatinius and all the greatest scoundrels on the other, were putting up for sale, and, carried away by their blind covetousness, did not understand that when they sold it they themselves were sold with it; I bade you have no fears on behalf of Cato himself, because the wise man can neither receive injury nor insult, and it is more certain that the immortal gods have given Cato as a pattern of a wise man to us, than that they gave Ulysses or Hercules to the earlier ages; for these our Stoics have declared were wise men, unconquered by labours, despisers of pleasure, and superior to all terrors.

Cato did not slay wild beasts, whose pursuit belongs to huntsmen and countrymen, nor did he exterminate fabulous creatures with fire and sword, or live in times when it was possible to believe that the heavens could be supported on the shoulders of one man. In an age which had thrown off its belief in antiquated superstitions, and had carried material knowledge to its highest point, he had to struggle against that many-headed monster, ambition, against that boundless lust for power which the whole world divided among three men could not satisfy. He alone withstood the vices of a worn-out State, sinking into ruin through its own bulk; he upheld the falling commonwealth as far as it could be upheld by one man's hand, until at last his support was withdrawn, and he shared the crash which he had so long averted, and perished together with that from which it was impious to separate him—for Cato did not outlive freedom, nor did freedom outlive Cato.

Think you that the people could do any wrong to such a man when they tore away his praetorship or his toga? when they bespattered his sacred head with the rinsings of their mouths? The wise man is safe, and no injury or insult can touch him.

III.

I think I see your excited and boiling temper. You are preparing to exclaim: "These are the things which take away all weight from your maxims; you promise great matters, such as I should not even wish for, let alone believe to be possible, and then, after all your brave words, though you say that the wise man is not poor, you admit that he often is in want of servants, shelter, and food. You say that the wise man is not mad, yet you admit that he sometimes loses his reason, talks nonsense, and is driven to the wildest actions by the stress of his disorder. When you say that the wise man cannot be a slave, you do not deny that he will be sold, carry out orders, and perform menial services at the bidding of his master; so, for all your proud looks, you come down to the level of every one else, and merely call things by different names.

Consequently, I suspect that something of this kind lurks behind this maxim, which at first sight appears so beautiful and noble, 'that the wise man can neither receive injury nor insult.' It makes a great deal of difference whether you declare that the wise man is beyond feeling resentment, or beyond receiving injury; for if you say that he will bear it calmly, he has no special privilege in that, for he has developed a very common quality, and one which is learned by long endurance of wrong itself, namely, patience. If you declare that he can never receive an injury, that is, that no one will attempt to do him one, then I will throw up all my occupations in life and become a Stoic." It has not been my object to decorate the wise man with mere imaginary verbal honours, but to raise him to a position where no injury will be permitted to reach him.

"What? will there be no one to tease him, to try to wrong him?" There is nothing on earth so sacred as not to be liable to sacrilege; yet holy things exist on high none the less because there are men who strike at a greatness which is far above themselves, though with no hope of reaching it. The invulnerable is not that which is never struck, but that which is never wounded. In this class I will show you the wise man. Can we doubt that the strength which is never overcome in fight is more to be relied on than that which is never challenged, seeing that untested power is untrustworthy, whereas that solidity which hurls back all attacks is deservedly regarded as the most trustworthy of all?

In like manner you may know that the wise man, if no injury hurts him, is of a higher type than if none is offered to him, and I should call him a brave man whom war does not subdue and the violence of the enemy does not alarm, not him who enjoys luxurious ease amid a slothful people. I say, then, that such a wise man is invulnerable against all injury; it matters not, therefore, how many darts be hurled at him, since he can be pierced by none of them. Just as the hardness of some stones

is impervious to steel, and adamant can neither be cut, broken, or ground, but blunts all instruments used upon it; just as some things cannot be destroyed by fire, but when encircled by flame still retain their hardness and shape; just as some tall projecting cliffs break the waves of the sea, and though lashed by them through many centuries, yet show no traces of their rage; even so the mind of the wise man is firm, and gathers so much strength, that it is as safe from injury as any of those things which I have mentioned.

IV.

“What then? Will there be no one who will try to do an injury to the wise man?” Yes, some one will try, but the injury will not reach him; for he is separated from the contact of his inferiors by so wide a distance that no evil impulse can retain its power of harm until it reaches him. Even when powerful men, raised to positions of high authority, and strong in the obedience of their dependents, strive to injure him, all their darts fall as far short of his wisdom as those which are shot upwards by bowstrings or catapults, which, although they rise so high as to pass out of sight, yet fall back again without reaching the heavens.

Why, do you suppose that when that stupid king clouded the daylight with the multitude of his darts, that any arrow of them all went into the sun? or that when he flung his chains into the deep, that he was able to reach Neptune? Just as sacred things escape from the hands of men, and no injury is done to the godhead by those who destroy temples and melt down images, so whoever attempts to treat the wise man with impertinence, insolence, or scorn, does so in vain. “It would be better,” say you, “if no one wished to do so.” You are expressing a wish that the whole human race were inoffensive, which may hardly be; moreover, those who would gain by such wrongs not being done are those who would do them, not he who could not suffer from them even if they were done; nay, I know not whether wisdom is not best displayed by calmness in the midst of annoyances, just as the greatest proof of a general’s strength in arms and men consists in his quietness and confidence in the midst of an enemy’s country.

V.

If you think fit, my Serenus, let us distinguish between injury and insult. The former is naturally the more grievous, the latter less important, and grievous only to the thin-skinned, since it angers men but does not wound them. Yet such is the weakness of men's minds, that many think that there is nothing more bitter than insult; thus you will find slaves who prefer to be flogged to being slapped, and who think stripes and death more endurable than insulting words. To such a pitch of absurdity have we come that we suffer not only from pain, but from the idea of pain, like children, who are terror-stricken by darkness, misshapen masks, and distorted faces, and whose tears flow at hearing names unpleasing to their ears, at the movement of our fingers, and other things which they ignorantly shrink from with a sort of mistaken spasm.

The object which injury proposes to itself is to do evil to some one. Now wisdom leaves no room for evil; to it, the only evil is baseness, which cannot enter into the place already occupied by virtue and honour. If, therefore, there can be no injury without evil, and no evil without baseness, and baseness cannot find any place with a man who is already filled with honour, it follows that no injury can reach the wise man: for if injury be the endurance of some evil, and the wise man can endure no evil, it follows that no injury takes effect upon the wise man. All injury implies a making less of that which it affects, and no one can sustain an injury without some loss either of his dignity, or of some part of his body, or of some of the things external to ourselves; but the wise man can lose nothing.

He has invested everything in himself, has entrusted nothing to fortune, has his property in safety, and is content with virtue, which does not need casual accessories, and therefore can neither be increased or diminished; for virtue, as having attained to the highest position, has no room for addition to herself, and fortune can take nothing away save what she gave. Now fortune does not give virtue; therefore she does not take it away. Virtue is free, inviolable, not to be moved, not to be shaken, and so hardened against misfortunes that she cannot be bent, let alone overcome by them. She looks unfalteringly on while tortures are being prepared for her; she makes no change of countenance, whether misery or pleasure be offered to her. The wise man therefore can lose nothing of whose loss he will be sensible, for he is the property of virtue alone, from whom he never can be taken away.

He enjoys all other things at the good pleasure of fortune; but who is grieved at the loss of what is not his own? If injury can hurt none of those things which are the peculiar property of the wise man, because while his virtue is safe they are safe, then it is impossible that an injury should be done to a wise man. Demetrius, who

was surnamed Poliorcetes, took Megara, and the philosopher Stilbo, when asked by him whether he had lost anything, answered, "No, I carry all my property about me." Yet his inheritance had been given up to pillage, his daughters had been outraged by the enemy, his country had fallen under a foreign dominion, and it was the king, enthroned on high, surrounded by the spears of his victorious troops, who put this question to him; yet he struck the victory out of the king's hands, and proved that, though the city was taken, he himself was not only unconquered but unharmed, for he bore with him those true goods which no one can lay hands upon.

What was being plundered and carried away hither and thither he did not consider to be his own, but to be merely things which come and go at the caprice of fortune; therefore he had not loved them as his own, for the possession of all things which come from without is slippery and insecure.

VI.

Consider now, whether any thief, or false accuser, or headstrong neighbour, or rich man enjoying the power conferred by a childless old age, could do any injury to this man, from whom neither war nor an enemy whose profession was the noble art of battering city walls could take away anything. Amid the flash of swords on all sides, and the riot of the plundering soldiery, amid the flames and blood and ruin of the fallen city, amid the crash of temples falling upon their gods, one man was at peace. You need not therefore account that a reckless boast, for which I will give you a surety, if my words goes for nothing.

Indeed, you would hardly believe so much constancy or such greatness of mind to belong to any man; but here a man comes forward to prove that you have no reason for doubting that one who is but of human birth can raise himself above human necessities, can tranquilly behold pains, losses, diseases, wounds, and great natural convulsions roaring around him, can bear adversity with calm and prosperity with moderation, neither yielding to the former nor trusting to the latter, that he can remain the same amid all varieties of fortune, and think nothing to be his own save himself, and himself too only as regards his better part.

“Behold,” says he, “I am here to prove to you that although, under the direction of that destroyer of so many cities, walls may be shaken by the stroke of the ram, lofty towers may be suddenly brought low by galleries and hidden mines, and mounds arise so high as to rival the highest citadel, yet that no siege engines can be discovered which can shake a well-established mind. I have just crept from amid the ruins of my house, and with conflagrations blazing all around I have escaped from the flames through blood. What fate has befallen my daughters, whether a worse one than that of their country, I know not. Alone and elderly, and seeing everything around me in the hands of the enemy, still I declare that my property is whole and untouched. I have, I hold whatever of mine I have ever had.

There is no reason for you to suppose me conquered and yourself my conqueror. It is your fortune which has overcome mine. As for those fleeting possessions which change their owners, I know not where they are; what belongs to myself is with me, and ever will be. I see rich men who have lost their estates; lustful men who have lost their loves, the courtesans whom they cherished at the cost of much shame; ambitious men who have lost the senate, the law courts, the places set apart for the public display of men’s vices; usurers who have lost their account-books, in which avarice vainly enjoyed an unreal wealth; but I possess everything whole and uninjured.

Leave me, and go and ask those who are weeping and lamenting over the loss of their money, who are offering their bare breasts to drawn swords in its defence, or

who are fleeing from the enemy with weighty pockets." See then, Serenus, that the perfect man, full of human and divine virtues, can lose nothing; his goods are surrounded by strong and impassable walls. You cannot compare with them the walls of Babylon, which Alexander entered, nor the fortifications of Carthage and Numantia, won by one and the same hand, nor the Capitol and citadel of Rome, which are branded with the marks of the victors' insults; the ramparts which protect the wise man are safe from fire and hostile invasion; they afford no passage; they are lofty, impregnable, divine.

VII.

You have no cause for saying, as you are wont to do, that this wise man of ours is nowhere to be found; we do not invent him as an unreal glory of the human race, or conceive a mighty shadow of an untruth, but we have displayed and will display him just as we sketch him, though he may perhaps be uncommon, and only one appears at long intervals; for what is great and transcends the common ordinary type is not often produced; but this very Marcus Cato himself, the mention of whom started this discussion, was a man who I fancy even surpassed our model. Moreover, that which hurts must be stronger than that which is hurt. Now wickedness is not stronger than virtue; therefore the wise man cannot be hurt. Only the bad attempt to injure the good.

Good men are at peace among themselves; bad ones are equally mischievous to the good and to one another. If a man cannot be hurt by one weaker than himself, and a bad man be weaker than a good one, and the good have no injury to dread, except from one unlike themselves; then, no injury takes effect upon the wise man; for by this time I need not remind you that no one save the wise man is good. "If," says our adversary, "Socrates was unjustly condemned, he received an injury." At this point it is needful for us to bear in mind that it is possible for some one to do an injury to me, and yet for me not to receive it, as if any one were to steal something from my country-house and leave it in my town-house, that man would commit a theft, yet I should lose nothing.

A man may become mischievous, and yet do no actual mischief: if a man lies with his own wife as if she were a stranger, he will commit adultery, but his wife will not; if a man gives me poison and the poison lose its strength when mixed with food, that man, by administering the poison, has made himself a criminal, even though he has done no hurt. A man is no less a brigand because his sword becomes entangled in his victim's clothes and misses its mark. All crimes, as far as concerns their criminality, are completed before the actual deed is accomplished. Some crimes are of such a nature and bound by such conditions that the first part can take place without the second, though the second cannot take place without the first. I will endeavour to explain these words: I can move my feet and yet not run; but I cannot run without moving my feet.

I can be in the water without swimming; but if I swim, I cannot help being in the water. The matter of which we are treating is of this character: if I have received an injury, it is necessary that some one must have done it to me; but if an injury has been done me, it is not necessary that I should have received one; for many circumstances may intervene to avert the injury, as, for example, some chance may strike the hand that is aiming at us, and the dart, after it has been thrown, may

swerve aside. So injuries of all kinds may by certain circumstances be thrown back and intercepted in mid-course, so that they may be done and yet not received.

VIII.

Moreover, justice can suffer nothing unjust, because contraries cannot co-exist; but an injury can only be done unjustly, therefore an injury cannot be done to the wise man. Nor need you wonder at no one being able to do him an injury; for no one can do him any good service either. The wise man lacks nothing which he can accept by way of a present, and the bad man can bestow nothing that is worthy of the wise man's acceptance; for he must possess it before he can bestow it, and he possesses nothing which the wise man would rejoice to have handed over to him. Consequently, no one can do either harm or good to the wise man, because divine things neither want help nor are capable of being hurt; and the wise man is near, indeed very near to the gods, being like a god in every respect save that he is mortal.

As he presses forward and makes his way towards the life that is sublime, well-ordered, without fear, proceeding in a regular and harmonious course, tranquil, beneficent, made for the good of mankind, useful both to itself and to others, he will neither long nor weep for anything that is grovelling. He who, trusting to reason, passes through human affairs with godlike mind, has no quarter from which he can receive injury. Do you suppose that I mean merely from no man? He cannot receive an injury even from fortune, which, whenever she contends with virtue, always retires beaten. If we accept with an undisturbed and tranquil mind that greatest terror of all, beyond which the angry laws and the most cruel masters have nothing to threaten us with, in which fortune's dominion is contained—if we know that death is not an evil, and therefore is not an injury either, we shall much more easily endure the other things, such as losses, pains, disgraces, changes of abode, bereavements, and partings, which do not overwhelm the wise man even if they all befall him at once, much less does he grieve at them when they assail him separately.

And if he bears the injuries of fortune calmly, how much more will he bear those of powerful men, whom he knows to be the hands of fortune.

IX.

He therefore endures everything in the same spirit with which he endures the cold of winter and the severities of climate, fevers, diseases, and other chance accidents, nor does he entertain so high an opinion of any man as to suppose that he acts of set purpose, which belongs to the wise man alone. All other men have no plans, but only plots and deceits and irregular impulses of mind, which he reckons the same as pure accident; now, what depends upon pure accident cannot rage around us designedly. He reflects, also, that the largest sources of injury are to be found in those things by means of which danger is sought for against us, as, for example, by a suborned accuser, or a false charge, or by the stirring up against us of the anger of great men, and the other forms of the brigandage of civilized life.

Another common type of injury is when a man loses some profit or prize for which he has long been angling; when an inheritance which he has spent great pains to render his own is left to some one else, or the favour of some noble house, through which he makes great gain, is taken from him. The wise man escapes all this, since he knows not what it is to live for hope or for fear. Add to this, that no one receives an injury unmoved, but is disturbed by the feeling of it. Now, the man free from mistakes has no disturbance; he is master of himself, enjoying a deep and tranquil repose of mind; for if an injury reaches him it moves and rouses him.

But the wise man is without anger, which is caused by the appearance of injury, and he could not be free from anger unless he were also free from injury, which he knows cannot be done to him; hence it is that he is so upright and cheerful, hence he is elate with constant joy. So far, however, is he from shrinking from the encounter either of circumstances or of men, that he makes use of injury itself to make trial of himself and test his own virtue. Let us, I beseech you, show favour to this thesis and listen with impartial ears and minds while the wise man is being made exempt from injury; for nothing is thereby taken away from your insolence, your greediest lusts, your blind rashness and pride; it is without prejudice to your vices that this freedom is sought for the wise man; we do not strive to prevent your doing an injury, but to enable him to sink all injuries beneath himself and protect himself from them by his own greatness of mind.

So in the sacred games many have won the victory by patiently enduring the blows of their adversaries and so wearying them out. Think that the wise man belongs to this class, that of men who, by long and faithful practice, have acquired strength to endure and tire out all the violence of their enemies.

X.

Since we have now discussed the first part of our subject, let us pass on to the second, in which we will prove by arguments, some of which are our own, but which for the most part are Stoic commonplaces, that the wise man cannot be insulted. There is a lesser form of injury, which we must complain of rather than avenge, which the laws also have considered not to deserve any special punishment. This passion is produced by a meanness of mind which shrinks at any act or deed which treats it with disrespect. "He did not admit me to his house to-day, although he admitted others; he either turned haughtily away or openly laughed when I spoke;" or, "he placed me at dinner, not on the middle couch (the place of honour), but on the lowest one;" and other matters of the same sort, which I can call nothing but the whinings of a queasy spirit.

These matters chiefly affect the luxuriously-nurtured and prosperous; for those who are pressed by worse evils have no time to notice such things as these. Through excessive idleness, dispositions naturally weak and womanish and prone to indulge in fancies through want of real injuries are disturbed at these things, the greater part of which arise from misunderstanding. He therefore who is affected by insult shows that he possesses neither sense nor trustfulness; for he considers it certain that he is scorned, and this vexation affects him with a certain sense of degradation, as he effaces himself and takes a lower room; whereas the wise man is scorned by no one, for he knows his own greatness, gives himself to understand that he allows no one to have such power over him, and as for all of what I should not so much call distress as uneasiness of mind, he does not overcome it, but never so much as feels it.

Some other things strike the wise man, though they may not shake his principles, such as bodily pain and weakness, the loss of friends and children, and the ruin of his country in war-time. I do not say that the wise man does not feel these, for we do not ascribe to him the hardness of stone or iron; there is no virtue but is conscious of its own endurance. What then does he? He receives some blows, but when he has received them he rises superior to them, heals them, and brings them to an end; these more trivial things he does not even feel, nor does he make use of his accustomed fortitude in the endurance of evil against them, but either takes no notice of them or considers them to deserve to be laughed at.

XI.

Besides this, as most insults proceed from those who are haughty and arrogant and bear their prosperity ill, he has something wherewith to repel this haughty passion, namely, that noblest of all the virtues, magnanimity, which passes over everything of that kind as like unreal apparitions in dreams and visions of the night, which have nothing in them substantial or true. At the same time he reflects that all men are too low to venture to look down upon what is so far above them. The Latin word *_contumelia_* is derived from the word *_contempt_*, because no one does that injury to another unless he regards him with contempt; and no one can treat his elders and betters with contempt, even though he does what contemptuous persons are wont to do; for children strike their parents' faces, infants rumple and tear their mother's hair, and spit upon her and expose what should be covered before her, and do not shrink from using dirty language; yet we do not call any of these things contemptuous.

And why? Because he who does it is not able to show contempt. For the same reason the scurrilous raillery of our slaves against their masters amuses us, as their boldness only gains licence to exercise itself at the expense of the guests if they begin with the master; and the more contemptible and the more an object of derision each one of them is, the greater licence he gives his tongue. Some buy forward slave-boys for this purpose, cultivate their scurrility and send them to school that they may vent premeditated libels, which we do not call insults, but smart sayings; yet what madness, at one time to be amused and at another to be affronted by the same thing, and to call a phrase an outrage when spoken by a friend, and an amusing piece of raillery when used by a slave-boy!

XII.

In the same spirit in which we deal with boys, the wise man deals with all those whose childhood still endures after their youth is past and their hair is grey. What do men profit by age when their mind has all the faults of childhood and their defects are intensified by time? when they differ from children only in the size and appearance of their bodies, and are just as unsteady and capricious, eager for pleasure without discrimination, timorous and quiet through fear rather than through natural disposition? One cannot say that such men differ from children because the latter are greedy for knuckle-bones and nuts and coppers, while the former are greedy for gold and silver and cities; because the latter play amongst themselves at being magistrates, and imitate the purple-edged robe of state, the lictors' axes, and the judgment-seat, while the former play with the same things in earnest in the Campus Martius and the courts of justice; because the latter pile up the sand on the seashore into the likeness of houses, and the former, with an air of being engaged in important business, employ themselves in piling up stones and walls and roofs until they have turned what was intended for the protection of the body into a danger to it?

Children and those more advanced in age both make the same mistake, but the latter deal with different and more important things; the wise man, therefore, is quite justified in treating the affronts which he receives from such men as jokes: and sometimes he corrects them, as he would children, by pain and punishment, not because he has received an injury, but because they have done one and in order that they may do so no more. Thus we break in animals with stripes, yet we are not angry with them when they refuse to carry their rider, but curb them in order that pain may overcome their obstinacy. Now, therefore, you know the answer to the question which was put to us, "Why, if the wise man receives neither injury nor insult, he punishes those who do these things?" He does not revenge himself, but corrects them.

XIII.

What, then, is there to prevent your believing this strength of mind to belong to the wise man, when you can see the same thing existing in others, though not from the same cause?—for what physician is angry with a crazy patient? who takes to heart the curses of a fever-stricken one who is denied cold water? The wise man retains in his dealings with all men this same habit of mind which the physician adopts in dealing with his patients, whose parts of shame he does not scorn to handle should they need treatment, nor yet to look at their solid and liquid evacuations, nor to endure their reproaches when frenzied by disease. The wise man knows that all those who strut about in purple-edged togas, healthy and embrowned, are brain-sick people, whom he regards as sick and full of follies.

He is not, therefore, angry, should they in their sickness presume to bear themselves somewhat impertinently towards their physician, and in the same spirit as that in which he sets no value upon their titles of honour, he will set but little value upon their acts of disrespect to himself. He will not rise in his own esteem if a beggar pays his court to him, and he will not think it an affront if one of the dregs of the people does not return his greeting. So also he will not admire himself even if many rich men admire him; for he knows that they differ in no respect from beggars—nay, are even more wretched than they; for beggars want but a little, whereas rich men want a great deal.

Again, he will not be moved if the King of the Medes, or Attalus, King of Asia, passes by him in silence with a scornful air when he offers his greeting; for he knows that such a man's position has nothing to render it more enviable than that of the man whose duty it is in some great household to keep the sick and mad servants in order. Shall I be put out if one of those who do business at the temple of Castor, buying and selling worthless slaves, does not return my salute, a man whose shops are crowded with throngs of the worst of bondmen? I trow not; for what good can there be in a man who owns none but bad men? As the wise man is indifferent to the courtesy or incivility of such a man, so is he to that of a king.

"You own," says he, "the Parthians and Bactrians, but they are men whom you keep in order by fear, they are people whose possession forbids you to unstring the bow, they are fierce enemies, on sale, and eagerly looking out for a new master." He will not, then, be moved by an insult from any man for though all men differ one from another, yet the wise man regards them all as alike on account of their equal folly; for should he once lower himself to the point of being affected by either injury or insult, he could never feel safe afterwards, and safety is the especial advantage of the wise man, and he will not be guilty of showing respect to the man who has done

him an injury by admitting that he has received one, because it necessarily follows that he who is disquieted at any one's scorn would value that person's admiration.

XIV.

Such madness possesses some men that they imagine it possible for an affront to be put upon them by a woman. What matters it who she may be, how many slaves bear her litter, how heavily her ears are laden, how soft her seat? she is always the same thoughtless creature, and unless she possesses acquired knowledge and much learning, she is fierce and passionate in her desires. Some are annoyed at being jostled by a heater of curling-tongs, and call the reluctance of a great man's porter to open the door, the pride of his nomenclator, or the disdainfulness of his chamberlain, insults. O! what laughter is to be got out of such things, with what amusement the mind may be filled when it contrasts the frantic follies of others with its own peace!

"How then? will the wise man not approach doors which are kept by a surly porter?" Nay, if any need calls him thither, he will make trial of him, however fierce he may be, will tame him as one tames a dog by offering it food, and will not be enraged at having to expend entrance-money, reflecting that on certain bridges also one has to pay toll; in like fashion he will pay his fee to whoever farms this revenue of letting in visitors, for he knows that men are wont to buy whatever is offered for sale. A man shows a poor spirit if he is pleased with himself for having answered the porter cavalierly, broken his staff, forced his way into his master's presence, and demanded a whipping for him. He who strives with a man makes himself that man's rival, and must be on equal terms with him before he can overcome him.

But what will the wise man do when he receives a cuff? He will do as Cato did when he was struck in the face; he did not flare up and revenge the outrage, he did not even pardon it, but ignored it, showing more magnanimity in not acknowledging it than if he had forgiven it. We will not dwell long upon this point; for who is there who knows not that none of those things which are thought to be good or evil are looked upon by the wise man and by mankind in general in the same manner? He does not regard what all men think low or wretched; he does not follow the people's track, but as the stars move in a path opposite to that of the earth, so he proceeds contrary to the prejudices of all.

XV.

Cease then to say, "Will not the wise man, then, receive an injury if he be beaten, if his eye be knocked out? will he not receive an insult if he be hooted through the Forum by the foul voices of ruffians? if at a court banquet he be bidden to leave the table and eat with slaves appointed to degrading duties? if he be forced to endure anything else that can be thought of that would gall a high spirit?" However many or however severe these crosses may be, they will all be of the same kind; and if small ones do not affect him, neither will greater ones; if a few do not affect him, neither will more. It is from your own weakness that you form your idea of his colossal mind, and when you have thought how much you yourselves could endure to suffer, you place the limit of the wise man's endurance a little way beyond that.

But his virtue has placed him in another region of the universe which has nothing in common with you. Seek out sufferings and all things hard to be borne, repulsive to be heard or seen; he will not be overwhelmed by their combination, and will bear all just as he bears each one of them. He who says that the wise man can bear this and cannot bear that, and restrains his magnanimity within certain limits, does wrong; for Fortune overcomes us unless she is entirely overcome. Think not that this is mere Stoic austerity. Epicurus, whom you adopt as the patron of your laziness, and who, you imagine, always taught what was soft and slothful and conducive to pleasure, said, "Fortune seldom stands in a wise man's way." How near he came to a manly sentiment! Do thou dare to speak more boldly, and clear her out of the way altogether!

This is the house of the wise man—narrow, unadorned, without bustle and splendour, the threshold guarded by no porters who marshal the crowd of visitors with a haughtiness proportionate to their bribes—but Fortune cannot cross this open and unguarded threshold. She knows that there is no room for her where there is nothing of hers.

XVI.

Now if even Epicurus, who made more concessions to the body than any one, takes a spirited tone with regard to injuries, what can appear beyond belief or beyond the scope of human nature amongst us Stoics? He says that injuries may be endured by the wise man, we say that they do not exist for him. Nor is there any reason why you should declare this to be repugnant to nature. We do not deny that it is an unpleasant thing to be beaten or struck, or to lose one of our limbs, but we say that none of these things are injuries. We do not take away from them the feeling of pain, but the name of "injury," which cannot be received while our virtue is unimpaired. We shall see which of the two is nearest the truth; each of them agree in despising injury.

You ask what difference there is between them? All that there is between two very brave gladiators, one of whom conceals his wound and holds his ground, while the other turns round to the shouting populace, gives them to understand that his wound is nothing, and does not permit them to interfere on his behalf. You need not think that it is any great thing about which we differ; the whole gist of the matter, that which alone concerns you, is what both schools of philosophy urge you to do, namely, to despise injuries and insults, which I may call the shadows and outlines of injuries, to despise which does not need a wise man, but merely a sensible one, who can say to himself, "Do these things befall me deservedly or undeservedly? If deservedly, it is not an insult, but a judicial sentence; if undeservedly, then he who does injustice ought to blush, not I.

And what is this which is called an insult? Some one has made a joke about the baldness of my head, the weakness of my eyes, the thinness of my legs, the shortness of my stature; what insult is there in telling me that which every one sees? We laugh when *tête-à-tête* at the same thing at which we are indignant when it is said before a crowd, and we do not allow others the privilege of saying what we ourselves are wont to say about ourselves; we are amused at decorous jests, but are angry if they are carried too far."

XVII.

Chrysippus says that a man was enraged because some one called him a sea-sheep; we have seen Fidus Cornelius, the son-in-law of Ovidius Naso, weeping in the Senate-house because Corbulo called him a plucked ostrich; his command of his countenance did not fail him at other abusive charges, which damaged his character and way of life; at this ridiculous saying he burst into tears. So deplorable is the weakness of men's minds when reason no longer guides them. What of our taking offence if any one imitates our talk, our walk, or apes any defect of our person or our pronunciation? as if they would become more notorious by another's imitation than by our doing them ourselves. Some are unwilling to hear about their age and grey hairs, and all the rest of what men pray to arrive at.

The reproach of poverty agonizes some men, and whoever conceals it makes it a reproach to himself; and therefore if you of your own accord are the first to acknowledge it, you cut the ground from under the feet of those who would sneer and politely insult you; no one is laughed at who begins by laughing at himself. Tradition tells us that Vatinius, a man born both to be laughed at and hated, was a witty and clever jester. He made many jokes about his feet and his short neck, and thus escaped the sarcasms of Cicero above all, and of his other enemies, of whom he had more than he had diseases. If he, who through constant abuse had forgotten how to blush, could do this by sheer brazenness, why should not he who has made some progress in the education of a gentleman and the study of philosophy?

Besides, it is a sort of revenge to spoil a man's enjoyment of the insult he has offered to us; such men say, "Dear me, I suppose he did not understand it." Thus the success of an insult lies in the sensitiveness and rage of the victim; hereafter the insulter will sometimes meet his match; some one will be found to revenge you also.

XVIII.

Gaius Caesar, among the other vices with which he overflowed, was possessed by a strange insolent passion for marking every one with some note of ridicule, he himself being the most tempting subject for derision; so ugly was the paleness which proved him mad, so savage the glare of the eyes which lurked under his old woman's brow, so hideous his misshapen head, bald and dotted about with a few cherished hairs; besides the neck set thick with bristles, his thin legs, his monstrous feet. It would be endless were I to mention all the insults which he heaped upon his parents and ancestors, and people of every class of life. I will mention those which brought him to ruin. An especial friend of his was Asiaticus Valerius, a proud-spirited man and one hardly likely to put up with another's insults quietly.

At a drinking bout, that is, a public assembly, Gaius, at the top of his voice, reproached this man with the way his wife behaved in bed. Good gods! that a man should hear that the emperor knew this, and that he, the emperor, should describe his adultery and his disappointment to the lady's husband, I do not say to a man of consular rank and his own friend. Chaerea, on the other hand, the military tribune, had a voice not befitting his prowess, feeble in sound, and somewhat suspicious unless you knew his achievements. When he asked for the watchword Gaius at one time gave him "Venus," and at another "Priapus," and by various means reproached the man-at-arms with effeminate vice; while he himself was dressed in transparent clothes, wearing sandals and jewellery.

Thus he forced him to use his sword, that he might not have to ask for the watchword oftener; it was Chaerea who first of all the conspirators raised his hand, who cut through the middle of Caligula's neck with one blow. After that, many swords, belonging to men who had public or private injuries to avenge, were thrust into his body, but he first showed himself a man who seemed least like one. The same Gaius construed everything as an insult (since those who are most eager to offer affronts are least able to endure them). He was angry with Herennius Macer for having greeted him as Gaius—nor did the chief centurion of triarii get off scot-free for having saluted him as Caligula; having been born in the camp and brought up as the child of the legions, he had been wont to be called by this name, nor was there any by which he was better known to the troops, but by this time he held "Caligula" to be a reproach and a dishonour.

Let wounded spirits, then, console themselves with this reflexion, that, even though our easy temper may have neglected to revenge itself, nevertheless that there will be some one who will punish the impertinent, proud, and insulting man, for these are vices which he never confines to one victim or one single offensive act. Let us look at the examples of those men whose endurance we admire, as, for instance, that

of Socrates, who took in good part the published and acted jibes of the comedians upon himself, and laughed no less than he did when he was drenched with dirty water by his wife Xanthippe. Antisthenes was reproached with his mother being a barbarian and a Thracian; he answered that the mother of the gods, too, came from Mount Ida.

XIX.

We ought not to engage in quarrels and wrangling; we ought to betake ourselves far away and to disregard everything of this kind which thoughtless people do (indeed thoughtless people alone do it), and to set equal value upon the honours and the reproaches of the mob; we ought not to be hurt by the one or to be pleased by the other. Otherwise we shall neglect many essential points, shall desert our duty both to the state and in private life through excessive fear of insults or weariness of them, and sometimes we shall even miss what would do us good, while tortured by this womanish pain at hearing something not to our mind.

Sometimes, too, when enraged with powerful men we shall expose this failing by our reckless freedom of speech; yet it is not freedom to suffer nothing—we are mistaken—freedom consists in raising one's mind superior to injuries and becoming a person whose pleasures come from himself alone, in separating oneself from external circumstances that one may not have to lead a disturbed life in fear of the laughter and tongues of all men; for if any man can offer an insult, who is there who cannot? The wise man and the would-be wise man will apply different remedies to this; for it is only those whose philosophical education is incomplete, and who still guide themselves by public opinion, who would suppose that they ought to spend their lives in the midst of insults and injuries; yet all things happen in a more endurable fashion to men who are prepared for them.

The nobler a man is by birth, by reputation, or by inheritance, the more bravely he should bear himself, remembering that the tallest men stand in the front rank in battle. As for insults, offensive language, marks of disgrace, and such-like disfigurements, he ought to bear them as he would bear the shouts of the enemy, and darts or stones flung from a distance, which rattle upon his helmet without causing a wound; while he should look upon injuries as wounds, some received on his armour and others on his body, which, he endures without falling or even leaving his place in the ranks. Even though you be hard pressed and violently attacked by the enemy, still it is base to give way; hold the post assigned to you by nature. You ask, what this post is? it is that of being a man.

The wise man has another help, of the opposite kind to this; you are hard at work, while he has already won the victory. Do not quarrel with your own good advantage, and, until you shall have made your way to the truth, keep alive this hope in your minds, be willing to receive the news of a better life, and encourage it by your admiration and your prayers; it is to the interest of the commonwealth of mankind that there should be some one who is unconquered, some one against whom fortune has no power.

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