

The Dumb Oracle

By Richard Garnett

Many the Bacchi that brandish the rod:
Few that be filled with the fire of the God.

I

In the days of King Attalus, before oracles had lost their credit, one of peculiar reputation, inspired, as was believed, by Apollo, existed in the city of Doryheum, in Phrygia. Contrary to usage, its revelations were imparted through the medium of a male priest. It was rarely left unthronged by devout questioners, whose inquiries were resolved in writing, agreeably to the method delivered by the pious Lucian, in his work "Concerning False Prophecy."¹ Sometimes, on extraordinary occasions, a voice, evidently that of the deity, was heard declaring the response from the innermost recesses of the shrine. The treasure house of the sanctuary was stored with tripods and goblets, in general wrought from the precious metals; its coffers were loaded with coins and ingots; the sacrifices of wealthy suppliants and the copious offerings in kind of the country people provided superabundantly for the daily maintenance of the temple servitors; while a rich endowment in land maintained the dignity of its guardians, and of the officiating priest. The latter reverend personage was no less eminent for prudence than for piety; on which account the Gods had rewarded him with extreme obesity. At length he died, whether of excess in meat or in drink is not agreed among historians. The guardians of the temple met to choose a successor, and, naturally desirous that the sanctity of the oracle should suffer no abatement, elected a young priest of goodly presence and ascetic life; the humblest, purest, most fervent, and most ingenuous of the sons of men. So rare a choice might well be expected to be accompanied by some extraordinary manifestation, and, in fact, a prodigy took place which filled the sacred authorities with dismay. The responses of the oracle ceased suddenly and altogether. No revelation was vouchsafed to the pontiff in his slumbers; no access of prophetic fury constrained him to disclose the secrets of the future; no voice rang from the shrine; and the unanswered epistles of the suppliants lay a hopeless encumbrance on the great altar. As a natural consequence they speedily ceased to arrive; the influx of offerings into the treasury terminated along with them; the temple-courts were bare of worshippers; and the only victims whose blood smoked within them were those slain by the priest himself, in the hope of appeasing the displeasure of Apollo. The modest hierophant took all the blame upon his own shoulders; he did not doubt that he had excited the Deity's wrath by some mysterious but heinous pollution; and was confirmed in this opinion by the unanimous verdict of all whom he approached.

One day as he sat sadly in the temple, absorbed in painful meditation, and pondering how he might best relieve himself of his sacred functions, he was startled by the now unwonted sound of a footstep, and, looking up, espied an ancient woman. Her appearance was rather venerable than prepossessing. He recognised her as one of the inferior ministers of the temple.

¹ *Pseudomantis*, Cap. 19-21.

“Reverend mother,” he addressed her, “doubtless thou comest to mingle with mine thy supplications to the Deity, that it may please him to indicate the cause, and the remedy of his wrath.”

“No, son,” returned the venerable personage, “I propose to occasion no such needless trouble to Apollo, or any other Divinity. I hold within mine own hand the power of reviving the splendour of this forsaken sanctuary, and for such consideration as thou wilt thyself pronounce equitable, I am minded to impart the same unto thee.” And as the astonished priest made no answer, she continued:

“My price is one hundred pieces of gold.”

“Wretch!” exclaimed the priest indignantly, “thy mercenary demand alone proves the vanity of thy pretence of being initiated into the secrets of the Gods. Depart my presence this moment!”

The old woman retired without a syllable of remonstrance, and the incident soon passed from the mind of the afflicted priest. But on the following day, at the same hour, the aged woman again stood before him, and said:

“My price is *two* hundred pieces of gold.”

Again she was commanded to depart, and again obeyed without a murmur. But the adventure now occasioned the priest much serious reflection. To his excited fancy, the patient persistency of the crone began to assume something of a supernatural character. He considered that the ways of the Gods are not as our ways, and that it is rather the rule than the exception with them to accomplish their designs in the most circuitous manner, and by the most unlikely instruments. He also reflected upon the history of the Sibyl and her books, and shuddered to think that unseasonable obstinacy might in the end cost the temple the whole of its revenues. The result of his cogitations was a resolution, if the old woman should present herself on the following day, to receive her in a different manner.

Punctual to the hour she made her appearance, and croaked out, “My price is *three* hundred pieces of gold.”

“Venerable ambadress of Heaven,” said the priest, “thy boon is granted thee. Relieve the anguish of my bosom as speedily as thou mayest.”

The old woman’s reply was brief and expressive. It consisted in extending her open and hollow palm, into which the priest counted the three hundred pieces of gold with as much expedition as was compatible with the frequent interruptions necessitated by the crone’s depositing each successive handful in a leather pouch; and the scrutiny, divided between jealousy and affection, which she bestowed on each individual coin.

“And now,” said the priest, when the operation was at length completed, “fulfil thy share of the compact.”

“The cause of the oracle’s silence,” returned the old woman, “is the unworthiness of the minister.”

“Alas! ’tis even as I feared,” sighed the priest. “Declare now, wherein consists my sin?”

“It consists in this,” replied the old woman, “that the beard of thy understanding is not yet grown; and that the egg-shell of thy inexperience is still sticking to the head of thy simplicity; and that thy brains bear no adequate proportion to the skull enveloping them; and in fine, lest I seem to speak overmuch in parables, or to employ a superfluity of epithets, that thou art an egregious nincompoop.”

And as the amazed priest preserved silence, she pursued:

“Can aught be more shameful in a religious man than ignorance of the very nature of religion? Not to know that the term, being rendered into the language of truth, doth therein signify

deception practised by the few wise upon the many foolish, for the benefit of both, but more particularly the former? O silly as the crowds who hitherto have brought their folly here, but now carry it elsewhere to the profit of wiser men than thou! O fool! to deem that oracles were rendered by Apollo! How should this be, seeing that there is no such person? Needs there, peradventure, any greater miracle for the decipherment of these epistles than a hot needle?² As for the supernatural voice, it doth in truth proceed from a respectable, and in some sense a sacred personage, being mine own when I am concealed within a certain recess prepared for me by thy lamented predecessor, whose mistress I was in youth, and whose coadjutor I have been in age. I am now ready to minister to thee in the latter capacity. Be ruled by me; exchange thy abject superstition for common sense; thy childish simplicity for discreet policy; thy unbecoming spareness for a majestic portliness; thy present ridiculous and uncomfortable situation for the repute of sanctity, and the veneration of men. Thou wilt own that this is cheap at three hundred pieces.”

The young priest had hearkened to the crone’s discourse with an expression of the most exquisite distress. When she had finished, he arose, and disregarding his repulsive companion’s efforts to detain him, departed hastily from the temple.

II

It was the young priest’s purpose, as soon as he became capable of forming one, to place the greatest possible distance between himself and the city of Doryheum. The love of roaming insensibly grew upon him, and ere long his active limbs had borne him over a considerable portion of Asia. His simple wants were easily supplied by the wild productions of the country, supplemented when needful by the proceeds of light manual labour. By degrees the self-contempt which had originally stung him to desperation took the form of an ironical compassion for the folly of mankind, and the restlessness which had at first impelled him to seek relief in a change of scene gave place to a spirit of curiosity and observation. He learned to mix freely with all orders of men, save one, and rejoiced to find the narrow mysticism which he had imbibed from his previous education gradually yielding to contact with the great world. From one class of men, indeed, he learned nothing—the priests, whose society he eschewed with scrupulous vigilance, nor did he ever enter the temples of the Gods. Diviners, augurs, all that made any pretension whatever to a supernatural character, he held in utter abhorrence, and his ultimate return in the direction of his native country is attributed to his inability to persevere further in the path he was following without danger of encountering Chaldean soothsayers, or Persian magi, or Indian gymnosophists.

He cherished, however, no intention of returning to Phrygia, and was still at a considerable distance from that region, when one night, as he was sitting in the inn of a small country town, his ear caught a phrase which arrested his attention.

“As true as the oracle of Dorylæum.” The speaker was a countryman, who appeared to have been asseverating something regarded by the rest of the company as greatly in need of confirmation. The sudden start and stifled cry of the ex-priest drew all eyes to him, and he felt constrained to ask, with the most indifferent air he could assume:

“Is the oracle of Dorylæum, then, so exceedingly renowned for veracity?”

“Whence comest thou to be ignorant of that?” demanded the countryman, with some disdain. “Hast thou never heard of the priest Eubulides?”

² Lucian.

“Eubulides!” exclaimed the young traveller, “that is my own name!”

“Thou mayest well rejoice, then,” observed another of the guests, “to bear the name of one so holy and pure, and so eminently favoured by the happy Gods. So handsome and dignified, moreover, as I may well assert who have often beheld him discharging his sacred functions. And truly, now that I scan thee more closely, the resemblance is marvellous. Only that thy namesake bears with him a certain air of divinity, not equally conspicuous in thee.”

“Divinity!” exclaimed another. “Aye, if Phœbus himself ministered at his own shrine, he could wear no more majestic semblance than Eubulides.”

“Or predict the future more accurately,” added a priest.

“Or deliver his oracles in more exquisite verse,” sub-joined a poet.

“Yet is it not marvellous,” remarked another speaker, “that for some considerable time after his installation the good Eubulides was unable to deliver a single oracle?”

“Aye, and that the first he rendered should have foretold the death of an aged woman, one of the ministers of the temple.”

“Ha!” exclaimed Eubulides, “how was that?”

“He prognosticated her decease on the following day, which accordingly came to pass, from her being choked with a piece of gold, not lawfully appertaining to herself, which she was endeavouring to conceal under the root of her tongue.”

“The Gods be praised for that!” ejaculated Eubulides, under his breath. “Pshaw! as if there were Gods! If they existed, would they tolerate this vile mockery? To keep up the juggle—well, I know it must be so; but to purloin my name! to counterfeit my person! By all the Gods that are not, I will expose the cheat, or perish in the endeavour.”

He arose early on the following morning and took his way towards the city of Dorylæum. The further he progressed in this direction, the louder became the bruit of the oracle of Apollo, and the more emphatic the testimonies to the piety, prophetic endowments, and personal attractions of the priest Eubulides; his own resemblance to whom was the theme of continual remark. On approaching the city, he found the roads swarming with throngs hastening to the temple, about to take part in a great religious ceremony to be held therein. The seriousness of worship blended delightfully with the glee of the festival, and Eubulides, who at first regarded the gathering with bitter scorn, found his moroseness insensibly yielding to the poetic charm of the scene. He could not but acknowledge that the imposture he panted to expose was at least the source of much innocent happiness, and almost wished that the importance of religion, considered as an engine of policy, had been offered to his contemplation from this point of view, instead of the sordid and revolting aspect in which it had been exhibited by the old woman.

In this ambiguous frame of mind he entered the temple. Before the high altar stood the officiating priest, a young man, the image, yet not the image, of himself. Lineament for lineament, the resemblance was exact, but over the stranger’s whole figure was diffused an air of majesty, of absolute serenity and infinite superiority, which excluded every idea of deceit, and so awed the young priest that his purpose of rushing forward to denounce the impostor and drag him from the shrine was immediately and involuntarily relinquished. As he stood confounded and irresolute, the melodious voice of the hierophant rang through the temple:

“Let the priest Eubulides stand forth.”

This summons naturally caused the greatest astonishment in every one but Eubulides, who emerged as swiftly as he could from the swaying and murmuring crowd, and confronted his namesake at the altar. A cry of amazement broke from the multitude as they beheld the pair, whose main distinction in the eyes of most was their garb. But, as they gazed, the form of the

officiating priest assumed colossal proportions; a circle of beams, dimming sunlight, broke forth around his head; hyacinthine locks clustered on his shoulders, his eyes sparkled with supernatural radiance; a quiver depended at his back; an unstrung bow occupied his hand; the majesty and benignity of his presence alike seemed augmented tenfold. Eubulides and the crowd sank simultaneously on their knees, for all recognised Apollo.

All was silence for a space. It was at length broken by Phœbus.

“Well, Eubulides,” inquired he, with the bland raillery of an Immortal, “has it at length occurred to thee that I may have been long enough away from Parnassus, filling thy place here while thou hast been disporting thyself amid heretics and barbarians?”

The abashed Eubulides made no response. The Deity continued:

“Deem not that thou hast in aught excited the displeasure of the Gods. In deserting their altars for Truth’s sake, thou didst render them the most acceptable of sacrifices, the only one, it may be, by which they set much store. But, Eubulides, take heed how thou again sufferest the unworthiness of men to overcome the instincts of thine own nature. Thy holiest sentiments should not have been at the mercy of a knave. If the oracle of Dorylæum was an imposture, hadst thou no oracle in thine own bosom? If the voice of Religion was no longer breathed from the tripod, were the winds and waters silent, or had aught quenched the everlasting stars? If there was no power to impose its mandates from without, couldst thou be unconscious of a power within? If thou hadst nothing to reveal unto men, mightest thou not have found somewhat to propound unto them? Know this, that thou hast never experienced a more truly religious emotion than that which led thee to form the design of overthrowing this my temple, the abode, as thou didst deem it, of fraud and superstition.”

“But now, Phœbus,” Eubulides ventured to reply, “shall I not return to the shrine purified by thy presence, and again officiate as thy unworthy minister?”

“No, Eubulides,” returned Phœbus, with a smile; “silver is good, but not for ploughshares. Thy strange experience, thy long wanderings, thy lonely meditations, and varied intercourse with men, have spoiled thee for a priest, while, as I would fain hope, qualifying thee for a sage. Some worthy person may easily be found to preside over this temple; and by the aid of such inspiration as I may from time to time see meet to vouchsafe him, administer its affairs indifferently well. Do thou, Eubulides, consecrate thy powers to a more august service than Apollo’s, to one that shall endure when Delphi and Delos know *his* no more.”

“To whose service, Phœbus?” inquired Eubulides.

“To the service of Humanity, my son,” responded Apollo.