The Comparison of Crassus with Nicias

By Plutarch

Translated by John Dryden

IN the comparison of these two, first, if we compare the estate of Nicias with that of Crassus, we must acknowledge Nicias's to have been more honestly got. In itself, indeed, one cannot much approve of gaining riches by working mines, the greatest part of which is done by malefactors and barbarians, some of them, too, bound, and perishing in those close and unwholesome places. But if we compare this with the sequestrations of Sylla, and the contracts for houses ruined by fire, we shall then think Nicias came very honestly by his money. For Crassus publicly and avowedly made use of these arts, as other men do of husbandry, and putting out money to interest; while as for other matters which he used to deny, when taxed with them, as, namely, selling his voice in the senate for gain's sake, and injuring allies, and courting women, and conniving at criminals, these are

things which Nicias was never so much as falsely accused of; nay, he was rather laughed at for giving money to those who made a trade of impeachments, merely out of timorousness, a course, indeed, that would by no means become Pericles and Aristides, but necessary for him who by nature was wanting in assurance, even as Lycurgus, the orator, frankly acknowledged to the people; for when he was accused for buying off an evidence, he said that he was very much pleased that, having administered their affairs for so long a time; he was at last accused, rather for giving than receiving. Again, Nicias, in his expenses, was a more public spirit than Crassus, priding himself much on the dedication of gifts in temples, on presiding at gymnastic games, and furnishing choruses for the plays, and adorning processions, while the expenses of Crassus, in feasting and afterwards providing food for so many myriads of people, were much greater than all that Nicias possessed as well as spent put together. So that one might wonder at any one's failing to see that vice is a certain inconsistency and incongruity of habit, after such an example of money dishonourably obtained and wastefully lavished away.

Let so much be said of their estates; as for their management of public affairs, I see not that any dishonesty, injustice, or arbitrary action

can be objected to Nicias, who was rather the victim of Alcibiades's tricks, and was always careful and scrupulous in his dealings with the people. But Crassus is very generally blamed for his changeableness in his friendships and enmities, for his unfaithfulness, and his mean and underhand proceedings; since he himself could not deny that to compass the consulship he hired men to lay violent hands upon Domitius and Cato. Then at the assembly held for assigning the provinces, many were wounded and four actually killed, and he himself, which I had omitted in the narrative of his life, struck with his fist one Lucius Analius, a senator, for contradicting him, so that he left the place bleeding. But as Crassus was to be blamed for his violent and arbitrary courses, so is Nicias no less to be blamed for his timorousness and meanness of spirit, which made him submit and give in to the basest people, whereas in this respect Crassus showed himself lofty-spirited and magnanimous, who having to do not with such as Cleon or Hyperbolus, but with the splendid acts of Caesar and the three triumphs of Pompey, would not stoop, but bravely bore up against their joint interests, and in obtaining the office of censor, surpassed even Pompey himself. For a statesman ought not to regard how invidious the thing is, but how noble, and by his greatness to overpower envy; but if he will be always aiming at security and quiet, and dread Alcibiades upon

the hustings, and the Lacedaemonians at Pylos, and Perdiccas in Thrace, there is room and opportunity enough for retirement, and he may sit out of the noise of business, and weave himself, as one of the sophists says, his triumphal garland of inactivity. His desire of peace, indeed, and of finishing the war was a divine and truly Grecian ambition, nor in this respect would Crassus deserve to be compared to him, though he had enlarged the Roman empire to the Caspian Sea or the Indian Ocean.

In a state where there is a sense of virtue, a powerful man ought not to give way to the ill-affected, or expose the government to those that are incapable of it, nor suffer high trusts to be committed to those who want common honesty. Yet Nicias, by his connivance, raised Cleon, a fellow remarkable for nothing but his loud voice and brazen face, to the command of an army. Indeed, I do not commend Crassus, who in the war with Spartacus was more forward to fight than became a discreet general, though he was urged into it by a point of honour, lest Pompey by his coming should rob him of the glory of the action, as Mummius did Metellus at the taking of Corinth, but Nicias's proceedings are inexcusable. For he did not yield up a mere opportunity of getting honour and advantage to his competitor, but believing that the expedition

would be very hazardous, was thankful to take care of himself, and left the commonwealth to shift for itself. And whereas Themistocles, lest a mean and incapable fellow should ruin the state by holding command in the Persian war, bought him off, and Cato, in a most dangerous and critical conjuncture, stood for the tribuneship for the sake of his country, Nicias, reserving himself for trifling expeditions against Minoa and Cythera, and the miserable Melians, if there be occasion to come to blows with the Lacedaemonians, slips off his general's cloak and hands over to the unskillfulness and rashness of Cleon, fleet, men, and arms, and the whole command, where the utmost possible skill was called for. Such conduct, I say, is not to be thought so much carelessness of his own fame, as of the interest and preservation of his country. By this means it came to pass he was compelled to the Sicilian war, men generally believing that he was so much honestly convinced of the difficulty of the enterprise, as ready out of mere love of ease and cowardice to lose the city the conquest of Sicily. But yet it is a great sign of his integrity, that though he was always averse from war, and unwilling to command, yet they always continued to appoint him as the best experienced and ablest general they had. On the other hand Crassus, though always ambitious of command, never attained to it, except by mere necessity in the servile war, Pompey

and Metellus and the two brothers Lucullus being absent, although at that time he was at his highest pitch of interest and reputation. Even those who thought most of him seem to have thought him, as the comic poet says-

"A brave man anywhere but in the field." There was no help, however, for the Romans, against his passion for command and for distinction. The Athenians sent out Nicias against his will to the war, and Crassus led out the Romans against theirs; Crassus brought misfortune on Rome, as Athens brought it on Nicias.

Still this is rather ground for praising Nicias, than for finding fault with Crassus. His experience and sound judgment as a general saved him from being carried away by the delusive hopes of his fellow-citizens, and made him refuse to entertain any prospect of conquering Sicily. Crassus, on the other hand, mistook, in entering on a Parthian war as an easy matter. He was eager, while Caesar was subduing the west, Gaul, Germany, and Britain, to advance for his part to the east and the Indian Sea, by the conquest of Asia, to complete the incursion of Pompey and the attempts of Lucullus, men of prudent temper and of unimpeachable worth, who nevertheless entertained the same projects

as Crassus, and acted under the same convictions. When Pompey was appointed to the like command, the senate was opposed to it; and after Caesar had routed three hundred thousand Germans, Cato recommended that he should be surrendered to the defeated enemy, to expiate in his own person the guilt of breach of faith. The people, meantime (their service to Cato!), kept holiday for fifteen days, and were overjoyed. What would have been their feelings, and how many holidays would they have celebrated, if Crassus had sent news from Babylon of victory, and thence marching onward had converted Media and Persia, the Hyrcanians, Susa and Bactra, into Roman provinces?

If wrong we must do, as Euripides says, and cannot be content with peace and present good things, let it not be for such results as destroying Mende or Scandea, or beating up the exiled Aeginetans in the coverts to which like hunted birds they had fled, when expelled from their homes, but let it be for some really great remuneration: nor let us part with justice, like a cheap and common thing, for a small and trifling price. Those who praise Alexander's enterprise and blame that of Crassus, judge of the beginning unfairly by the results.

In actual service, Nicias did much that deserves high praise. He frequently

defeated the enemy in battle, and was on the very point of capturing Syracuse; nor should he bear the whole blame of the disaster, which may fairly be ascribed in part to his want of health and to the jealousy entertained of him at home. Crassus, on the other hand, committed so many errors as not to leave fortune room to show him favour. It is no surprise to find such imbecility fall a victim to the power of Parthia; the only wonder is to see it prevailing over the wonted good fortune of Rome. One scrupulously observed, the other entirely slighted the arts of divination: and as both equally perished, it is difficult to see what inference we should draw. Yet the fault of over-caution, supported by old and general opinion, better deserves forgiveness than that of self-willed and lawless transgression.

In his death, however, Crassus had the advantage, as he did not surrender himself, nor submit to bondage, nor let himself be taken in by trickery, but was the victim only of the entreaties of his friends and the perfidy of his enemies; whereas Nicias enhanced the shame of his death by yielding himself up in the hope of disgraceful and inglorious escape.

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