

# The City of Philosophers

By Richard Garnett

## I

Nature is manifold, not infinite, though the extent of the resources of which she can dispose almost enables her to pass for such. Her cards are so multitudinous that the pairs are easily shuffled into ages so far asunder that their resemblance escapes remark. But sometimes her mischievous daughter Fortune manages to thrust these duplicates into such conspicuous places that their similarity cannot pass unobserved, and Nature is caught plagiarising from herself. She is thus detected dealing a king—or knave—a second time in the person of a king who has already fallen from her pack as an emperor. Brilliant, careless, selfish, yet good-natured *vauriens*, the Roman Emperor Gallienus and our Charles the Second, excelled in every art save the art of reigning, and might have excelled in that also if they would have taken the trouble. The circumstances of their reigns were in many respects as similar as their characters. Both were the sons of grave and strict fathers, each of whom had met with terrible misfortunes: one deprived of his liberty by his enemies, the other of his head by his own subjects. Each of the sons had been grievously vexed by rebels, but Charles's troubles from this quarter had mostly ended where those of Gallienus began. Each saw his dominions ravaged by pestilence in a manner beyond all former experience. The Goths destroyed the temple of the Ephesian Diana, and the Dutch burned the English fleet at Chatham. Charles shut up the Exchequer, and Gallienus debased the coinage. Charles accepted a pension from Louis XIV., and Gallienus devolved the burden of his Eastern provinces on a Syrian Emir. Their tastes and pursuits were as similar as their histories. Charles excelled as a wit and a critic; Gallienus as a poet and a gastronomer. Charles was curious about chemistry, and founded the Royal Society. In the third century the conception of the systematic investigation of nature did not exist. Gallienus, therefore, could not patronise exact science; and the great literary light of the age, Longinus, irradiated the court of Palmyra. But the Emperor bestowed his favour in ample measure on the chief contemporary philosopher, Plotinus, who strove to unite the characters of Plato and Pythagoras, of sage and seer. Like Schelling in time to come, he maintained the necessity of a special organ for the apprehension of philosophy, without perceiving that he thereby proclaimed philosophy bankrupt, and placed himself on the level of the Oriental hierophants, with whose sublime quackeries the modest sage could not hope to contend. So extreme was his humility, that he would not claim to have been consciously united to the Divinity more than four times in his life; without condemning magic and thaumaturgy, he left their practice to more adventurous spirits, and contented himself with the occasional visits of a familiar demon in the shape of a serpent. He experienced, however, frequent visitations of trance or ecstasy, sometimes lasting for a long period; and it may have been in one of these that he was inspired by the idea of asking the Emperor for a decayed city in Campania, there to establish a philosophic commonwealth, as nearly upon the model of Plato's Republic as the degeneracy of the times would allow.

"I cannot," said Gallienus, when the project had been explained to him, "object in principle to aught so festive and jocose. The age is turned upside down; its comedians are lamentable, and its sages ludicrous. It must moreover, I apprehend, be sated with the earthquakes, famines, pestilences, and barbarian invasions with which it hath been exclusively regaled for so long, and

must crave something enlivening, of the nature of thy proposition. But whether, when we arrive at the consideration of ways and means, I shall find my interview with my treasurer enlivening, is gravely to be questioned. I have heard homilies enough on my prodigality, which merely means that I prefer spending my treasures on myself to saving them for my successor, whose title will probably have been acquired by cutting my throat."

"I know," said Plotinus, "that the expenses of administering an empire must necessarily be prodigious. I am aware that the principal generals are only kept to their allegiance by enormous bribes. I well understand that the Empress must have pearls, and that the Roman populace must have panthers; and that, since Egypt has revolted, the hippopotamus is worth his weight in gold. I am further aware that the proposed colossal statue of your Majesty in the same metal, including a staircase, with room in the head for a child, like another Pallas in the brain of Zeus, must alone involve very considerable outlay. But I am encouraged by your Majesty's wise and statesmanlike measure of debasing the currency; since, money having become devoid of value, there can be no difficulty in devoting any amount of it to any purpose required."

"Plotinus," said Gallienus, "in this age the devil is taking the hindmost, and we are the hindmost. There are tidings to-day of a new earthquake in Bithynia, and three days' darkness, also of outbreaks of pestilence, and incursions of the barbarians, too numerous as well as to disagreeable to mention. At this moment some revolted legion is probably forcing the purple upon some reluctant general; and the Persian king, a great equestrian, is doubtless mounting his horse by the aid of my father's back. If I had been an old Roman, I should by this time have avenged my father, but I am a man of my age. Take the money for thy city, and see that it yields me some amusement at any rate. I assume, of course, that thou wilt exercise severe economy, and that cresses and spring water will be the diet of thy philosophers. Farewell, I go to Gaul to encounter Postumus. Willingly would I leave him in peace in Gaul if he would leave me in peace in Italy; but I foresee that if I do not attack him there he will attack me here. As if the Empire were not large enough for us all! What an ass the fellow must be!"

And so Gallienus changed his silk for steel, and departed for his Gallic campaign, where he bore himself more stoutly than his light talk would have led those who judged him by it to expect. Plotinus, provided with an Imperial script, undertook the regulation of his philosophical commonwealth in Campania, where a brief experience of architects and sophists threw him into an ecstasy, not of joy, which endured an unusually long time.

## II

On awakening from his long trance, Plotinus's first sensation was one of bodily hunger, the second of an even keener appetite for news of his philosophical Republic. In both respects it promised well to perceive that his chamber was occupied by his most eminent scholar, Porphyry, though he was less gratified to observe his disciple busied, instead of with the scrolls of the sages, with an enormous roll of accounts, which appeared to be occasioning him much perplexity.

"Porphyry!" cried the master, and the faithful disciple was by his couch in a moment.

We pass over the mutual joy, the greetings, the administration of restoratives, and creature comforts, the eager interrogations of Porphyry respecting the things his master had heard and seen in his trance, which proved to be unspeakable.

"And now," said Plotinus, who with all his mysticism was so good a man of business that, as his biographers acquaint us, he was in special request as a trustee, "and now, concerning this roll

of thine. Is it possible that the accounts connected with the installation of a few abstemious lovers of wisdom can have swollen to such a prodigious bulk? But indeed, why few? Peradventure all the philosophers of the earth have flocked to my city."

"It has, indeed," said Porphyry evasively, "been found necessary to incur certain expenses not originally foreseen."

"For a library, perhaps?" inquired Plotinus. "I remember thinking, just before my ecstasy, that the scrolls of the divine Plato, many of them autographic, might require some special housing."

"I rejoice to state," rejoined Porphyry, "that it is not these volumes that have involved us in our present difficulties with the superintendent of the Imperial treasury, nor can they indeed, seeing that they are now impignorated with him."

"Plato's manuscripts pawned!" exclaimed Plotinus, aghast. "Wherefore?"

"As part collateral security for expenses incurred on behalf of objects deemed of more importance by the majority of the philosophers."

"For example?"

"Repairing bath and completing amphitheatre."

"Bath! Amphitheatre!" gasped Plotinus.

"O dear master," remonstrated Porphyry, "thou didst not deem that philosophers could be induced to settle in a spot devoid of these necessities? Not a single one would have stayed if I had not yielded to their demands, which, as regarded the bath, involved the addition of exedr~ and of a sphæeristerium."

"And what can they want with an amphitheatre?" groaned Plotinus.

"They say it is for lectures," replied Porphyry; "I trust there is no truth in the rumour that the head of the Stoics is three parts owner of a lion of singular ferocity."

"I must see to this as soon as I can get about," said Plotinus, turning to the accounts. "What's this? To couch and litter for head of Peripatetic school!"

"Who is so enormously fat," explained Porphyry, "that these conveniences are really indispensable to him. The Peripatetic school is positively at a standstill."

"And no great matter," said Plotinus; "its master Aristotle was at best a rationalist, without perception of the stupersensual. What's this? To Maximus, for the invocation of demons."

"That," said Porphyry, "is our own Platonic dirty linen, and I heartily wish we were washing it elsewhere. Thou must know, dear master, that during thy trance the theurgic movement has attained a singular development, and that thou art regarded with disdain by thy younger disciples as one wholly behind the age, unacquainted with the higher magic, and who can produce no other outward and visible token of the Divine favour than the occasional companionship of a serpent."

"I would not assert that theurgy may not be lawfully undertaken," replied Plotinus, "provided that the adept shall have purified himself by a fast of forty months."

"It may be from neglect of this precaution," said Porphyry, "that our Maximus finds it so much easier to evoke the shades of Commodus and Caracalla than those of Socrates and Marcus Aurelius; and that these good spirits, when they do come, have no more recondite information to convey than that virtue differs from vice, and that one's grandmother is a fitting object of reverence."

"I fear this must expose Platonic truth to the derision of Epicurean scoffers," remarked Plotinus.

"O master, speak not of Epicureans, still less of Stoics! Wait till thou hast regained thy full strength, and then take counsel of some oracle."

“What meanest thou?” exclaimed Plotinus. “I insist upon knowing.”

Porphyry was saved from replying by the hasty entrance of a bustling portly personage of loud voice and imperious manner, in whom Plotinus recognised Theocles, the chief of the Stoics.

“I rejoice, Plotinus,” he began, “that thou hast at length emerged from that condition of torpor, so unworthy of a philosopher, which I might well designate as charlatanism were I not so firmly determined to speak no word which can offend any man. Thou wilt now be able to reprehend the malice or obtruseness of thy deputy, and to do me right in my contention with these impure dogs.”

“Which be they?” asked Plotinus.

“Do I not sufficiently indicate the followers of Epicurus?” demanded the Stoic.

“O master,” explained Porphyry, “in allotting and fitting up apartments designed for the respective sects of philosophers I naturally gave heed to what I understood to be the principles of each. To the Epicureans, as lovers of pleasure and luxury, I assigned the most commodious quarters, furnished the same with soft cushions and costly hangings, and provided a liberal table. I should have deemed it insulting to have offered any of these things to the frugal followers of Zeno, and nothing can surpass my astonishment at the manner in which the austere Theocles has incessantly persecuted me for choice food and wine, stately rooms and soft couches.”

“O Plotinus,” replied Theocles, “let me make the grounds of my conduct clear to thee. In the first place, the honour of my school is in my keeping. What will the vulgar think when they see the sty of Epicurus sumptuously adorned, and the porch of Zeno shabby and bare? Will they not deem that the Epicureans are highly respected and the Stoics made of little account? Furthermore, how can I and my disciples manifest our contempt for gold, dainties, wine, fine linen, and all the other instruments of luxury, unless we have them to despise? Shall we not appear like foxes, vilipending the grapes that we cannot reach? Not so; offer me delicacies that I may reject them, wine that I may pour it into the kennel, Tyrian purple that I may trample upon it, gold that I may fling it away; if it break an Epicurean’s head, so much the better.”

“Plotinus,” said Hermon, the chief of the Epicureans, who had meanwhile entered the apartment, “let this hypocrite have what he wants, and send him away. I and my followers are perfectly willing to remove at once into the inferior apartments, and leave ours for his occupation with all their furniture, and the reversion of our bill of fare. Thou should’st know that the imputations of the vulgar against our sect are the grossest calumnies. The Epicurean places happiness in tranquil enjoyment, not in luxury or sensual pleasures. There is not a thing I possess which I am not perfectly willing to resign, except the society of my female disciple.”

“Thy female disciple!” exclaimed the horrified Plotinus. “Thou art worse than the Stoic!”

“Plotinus,” said the Epicurean, “consider well ere, as is the manner of Platonists, thou committest thyself to a proposition of a transparently foolish nature. Thou desirest to gather all sorts of philosophers around thee, but to what end, if they are restrained from manifesting their characteristic tenets? Thou mightest as well seek to illustrate the habits of animals by establishing a menagerie in which panthers should eat grass, and antelopes be dieted on rabbits. An Epicurean without his female companion, unless by his own choice, is no more an Epicurean than a Cynic is a Cynic without his rags and his impudence. Wilt thou take from me my Pannychis, an object pleasing to the eye, and leave yonder fellow his tatters and his vermin?”

The apartment had gradually filled with philosophers, and Hermon was pointing to a follower of Diogenes whose robe so fully bespoke his obedience to his master’s precepts that his skin seemed almost clean in comparison.

“Consider also,” continued the Epicurean, “that thou art thyself by no means exempt from scandal.”

“What does the man mean?” demanded Plotinus, turning to Porphyry.

“Get them away,” whispered the disciple, “and I will tell thee.

Plotinus hastily conceded the point raised with reference to the interesting Pannychis, and the philosophers went off to effect their exchange of quarters. As soon as the room was clear, he repeated:

“What *does* the man mean?”

“I suppose he is thinking of Leaena,” said Porphyry.

“The most notorious character in Rome, who, finding her charms on the wane, has lately betaken herself to philosophy?”

“The same.”

“What of her?”

“She has followed thee here. She affects the greatest devotion to thee. She vows that nothing shall make her budge until thou hast recovered from thy ecstasy, and admitted her as thy disciple. She has rejected numerous overtures from the philosopher Theocles; entirely for thy sake, she affirms. She comes three times a day to inquire respecting thy condition, and I fear it must be acknowledged that she has once or twice managed to get into thy chamber.”

“O ye immortal Gods!” groaned Plotinus.

“Here she is!” exclaimed Porphyry, as a woman of masculine stature and bearing, with the remains of beauty not unskillfully patched, forced an entrance into the room.

“Plotinus,” she exclaimed, “behold the most impassioned of thy disciples. Let us celebrate the mystic nuptials of Wisdom and Beauty. Let the claims of my sex to philosophic distinction be vindicated in my person.”

“The question of the admission of women to share the studies and society of men,” rejoined Plotinus, “is one by no means exempt from difficulty.”

“How so? I deemed it had been determined long ago in favour of Aspasia?”

“Aspasia,” said Plotinus, “was a very exceptional woman.”

“And am not I?”

“I hope, that is, I conceive so,” said Plotinus. “But one may be an exceptional woman without being an Aspasia.”

“How so? Am I inferior to Aspasia in beauty?”

“I should hope not,” said Plotinus ambiguously.

“Or in the irregularity of my deportment?”

“I should think not,” said Plotinus, with more confidence. “Then why does the Plato of our age hesitate to welcome his Diotima?”

“Because,” said Plotinus, “you are not Diotima, and I am not Plato.”

“I am sure I am as much like Diotima as you are like Plato,” retorted the lady. “But let us come to our own time. Do I not hear that that creature Pannychis has obtained the freedom of the philosophers’ city, and the right to study therein?”

“She takes private lessons from Hermon, who is responsible for her.”

“The very thing!” exclaimed Leaena triumphantly. “I take private lessons from thee, and thou art responsible for me. Venus! what’s that?”

The exclamation was prompted by the sudden appearance of an enormous serpent, which, emerging from a chink in the wall, glided swiftly towards the couch of Plotinus. He reached forward to greet it, uttering a cry of pleasure.

“My guardian, my tutelary *dæmon*,” he exclaimed, “visible manifestation of *Æsculapius*! Then I am not forsaken by the immortal gods.”

“Take away the monster,” cried *Leaena*, in violent agitation, “the nasty thing! *Plotinus*, how can you? Oh, I shall faint! I shall die! Take it away, I say. You must choose between it and me.”

“Then, *Madam*,” said *Plotinus*, civilly but firmly, “I choose *it*.”

“Thank *Æsculapius* we are rid of her,” he added, as *Leaena* vanished from the apartment.

“I wish I knew that,” said *Porphyry*.

And indeed after no long time a note came up from *Theocles*, who was sure that *Plotinus* would not refuse him that privilege of instructing a female disciple which had been already, with such manifest advantage to philosophical research, accorded to his colleague *Hermon*. No objection could well be made, especially as *Plotinus* did not foresee how many chambermaids, and pages, and cooks, and perfumers, and tiring women and bath attendants would be required, ere *Leaena* could feel herself moderately comfortable. How unlike the modest *Pannychis*! who wanted but half a bed, which need not be stuffed with the down of hares or the feathers of partridges, without which sleep refused to visit *Leaena*’s eyelids.

It was natural that *Plotinus* should appeal to *Gallienus*, now returned from the Gallic expedition, but he could extract nothing save mysterious intimations, that the Emperor had his eye upon the philosophers, and that they might find him among them when they least expected it. *Plotinus*’s spirits drooped, and *Porphyry* was almost glad when he again relapsed into an ecstasy.

### III

When *Plotinus*’s eyes were at length opened, they fell not this time upon the faithful *Porphyry*, but upon two youthful followers of *Plato* who were beguiling the tedium of their vigil at his bedside by a game of dice, which prevented their observing his resuscitation. After a moment’s hesitation *Plotinus* resolved to lie quiet in the hope of hearing something that might indicate what influences were in the ascendant in the philosophical republic. He had not long to wait.

“Dice is dull work for long,” said one of the young men, indolently throwing himself back, and letting his caster fall upon the floor. “To think how much better one might be employed, but for having to watch this old fool here! I’ve a great mind to call up a slave.”

“All the slaves are sure to have gone to the show, unless any of them should be Christians. Besides, *Porphyry* would hear you, he’s only in a cat’s sleep,” returned his companion.

“Well, I mean to say it’s a shame. All the town will be in the theatre by this time.”

“How many gladiators, said you?”

“Forty pairs, the best show *Campania* has seen time out of mind.”

“How has it all come about?”

“Oh, news comes of the death of *Postumus*, killed by his own soldiers, and this passes as a great victory for want of a better. ‘We must have a day of thanksgiving,’ says *Theocles*. ‘Right,’ says *Leaena*, ‘I am dying to see an exhibition of gladiators.’ *Theocles* demurs at first, expecting to have to find the money—but *Leaena* tugs at his beard, and he gives in. Just at the nick of time the right sort of fellow pops up nobody knows whence, a lanista with hair like curling helichryse, as *Theocritus* has it, and a small army of gladiators, whom, out of devotion to the Emperor, he offers to exhibit for nothing. Who so pleased as *Theocles* now? He takes the chair as archon with *Leaena* by his side, and off goes every soul in the place, except *Pannychis*, who cannot bear the sight of blood, and *Porphyry*, who is an outrageous humanitarian, and us poor devils left in charge of this old dreamer.”

“Couldn’t we leave him to mind himself? He isn’t likely to awake yet.”

“Try him with your cloak-pin.” The student detached the implement in question, which was about the size of a small stiletto. Feeling uncertain what part of his person was to be the subject of experiment, Plotinus judged it advisable to manifest his recovery in an unmistakable fashion.

“O dear Master, what joy!” cried both the students in a breath. “Porphyry! Porphyry!”

The trusty scholar appeared immediately, and under pretence of fetching food, the two neophytes eloped to the amphitheatre.

“What means all this, Porphyry?” demanded Plotinus sternly. “The City of Philosophers polluted by human blood! The lovers of wisdom mingling with the dregs of the rabble!”

Porphyry’s account, which Plotinus could only extract by consenting to eat while his disciple talked, corresponded in all essential particulars with that of the two young men. “And I see not,” added he, “what we can do in the matter. This abomination is supposed to be in honour of the Emperor’s victories. If we interfere with it we shall be executed as rebels, supposing that we are not first torn to pieces as rioters.”

“Porphyry,” replied Plotinus, “I should esteem this disgrace to philosophy a disgrace to myself if I did not my utmost to avert it. Remain thou here, and perform my funeral rites if it be necessary.”

But to this Porphyry would by no means consent, and the two philosophers proceeded to the amphitheatre together. It was so crowded that there was no room on the seats for another person. Theocles was enthroned in the chair of honour, his beard manifesting evident traces of the depilatories administered by Leaena, who nevertheless sat by his side, her voluptuous face gloating over the anticipated banquet of agony. The philosophic part of the spectators were ranged all around, the remaining seats were occupied by a miscellaneous public. The master of the gladiators, a man of distinguished appearance, whose yellow locks gave him the aspect of a barbarian prince, stood in the arena surrounded by his myrmidons. The entry of Plotinus and Porphyry attracted his attention: he motioned to his followers, and in an instant the philosophers were seized, bound, and gagged without the excited assembly being in the least conscious of their presence.

Two men stepped out into the arena, both fine and attractive figures. The athletic limbs, the fair complexion, the curling yellow hair of one proclaimed the Goth; he lightly swung his huge sword in his right hand, and looked as if his sole arm would easily put to flight the crowd of effeminate spectators. The other’s beauty was of another sort; young, slender, pensive, spiritual, he looked like anything rather than a gladiator, and held his downward pointed sword with a negligent grasp.

“Guard thyself!” cried the Goth, placing himself in an attitude of offence.

“I spill not the blood of a fellow-creature,” answered the other, casting his sword away from him.

“Coward!” yelled well-nigh every voice in the amphitheatre.

“No,” answered the youth with a grave smile, “Christian.”

His shield and helmet followed his sword, he stood entirely defenceless before his adversary.

“Throw him to my lion,” cried Theocles.

“Or thy lioness,” suggested Hermon.

This allusion to Leaena provoked a burst of laughter. Suddenly the Goth aimed a mighty blow at the head of the unresisting man. A shorn curl fell to the ground, the consummate skill of the swordsman averted all further contact between his blade and the Christian, who remained erect and smiling, without having moved a muscle or an eyelash.

“Master,” said the Goth, addressing the lanista, “I had rather fight ten armed men than this unarmed one.”

“Good,” returned his lord, with a gesture of approval. “Retire both of you.”

A roar of disapprobation broke out from the spectators, which seemed not to produce the slightest effect on the lanista.

“Turn out the next pair,” they cried.

“I shall not,” said he.

“Wherefore?”

“Because I do not choose.”

“Rogue! Cheat! Swindler! Cast him into prison! Throw him to the lion!” Such epithets and recommendations rained from the spectators’ seats, accompanied by a pelting of more substantial missiles. In an instant the yellow hair and common dress lay on the ground, and those who knew him not by the features could by the Imperial ornaments recognise the Emperor Gallienus. With no less celerity his followers, the Goth and the Christian excepted, disencumbered themselves of their exterior vesture, and stood forward in the character of Roman soldiers.

“Friends,” cried Gallienus, turning to the plebeian multitude, “I am not about to balk you of your sport.”

At a sign from him the legionaries ascended to the seats allotted to the philosophic portion of the audience, and a torrent of wisdom in their persons, including that of Leæna, flung forth with the energy of a catapult, descended abruptly and violently to the earth. They were instantly seized and dragged into an erect attitude by the remainder of the soldiery, who, amid the most tempestuous peals of laughter and applause from the delighted public, thrust swords into their hands, ranged them in opposite ranks, and summoned them to begin the fight and quit themselves like men. It was equally ludicrous and pitiable to see the bald, mostly grey-bearded men, their garments torn in their expulsion and their persons bruised by the fall, confronting each other with quaking limbs, helplessly brandishing their weapons or feebly calling their adversaries to come on, while the soldiers prodded them from behind with spears, and urged them into the close quarters they so anxiously desired to avoid. Plotinus, helpless with his bonds and gag, looked on in impotent horror. Gallienus was often cruel, but could he intend such a revolting massacre? There must be something behind.

The honour of developing the Emperor’s purpose was reserved for Theocles, who, with admirable presence of mind, had ever since he found he must fight been engaged in trying to select the weakest antagonist. After hesitating between the unwieldy chief of the Peripatetics and the feminine Leæna he fixed on the latter, partly moved, perhaps, by the hope of avenging his beard. With a martial cry he sprang towards her, and upraised his weapon for a swashing blow. But he had sadly miscalculated. Leæna was hardly less versed in the combats of Mars than in those of Venus, having, in fact, commenced her distinguished career as a camp-follower of the Emperor Gordian. A tremendous stroke caught him on the hand; his blade dropped to the earth; why did not the fingers follow? Leæna elucidated the problem by a still more violent blow on his face; torrents of blood gushed forth indeed, but only from the nose. The sword doubled up; it had neither point nor edge. Encouraged by this opportune discovery the philosophers attacked each other with infinite spirit and valour. Infuriated by the blows given and received, by the pokings and proddings of the military, and the hilarious derision of the public, they cast away the shivered blades and resorted to the weapons of Nature. They kicked, they cuffed, they scratched, they tore the garments from each other’s shoulders, they foamed and rolled gasping in the yellow sand of the arena. At a signal from the Emperor the portal of the amphitheatre was thrown open,

and the whole mass of clawing and cuffing philosophy was bundled ignominiously into the street.

By this time Gallienus was seated on his tribunal, and Plotinus, released from his bonds, was standing by his side.

“O Emperor,” he murmured, deeply abashed, “what can I urge? Thou wilt surely demolish my city!”

“No, Plotinus,” replied Gallienus, pointing to the Goth and the Christian, “there are the men who will destroy the City of Philosophers. Would that were all they will destroy!”