The Sole Motive of Man’s Existence

The banquet was half over and the wine in lively progress round the table; yet the ladies did not retire. The presence of women over the wine was one of the cardinal articles of Julian’s social creed.

The conversation turned on the Christian religion which finally emerged from the arena stripped of all its plumes and in a condition woefully besmirched and bedraggled. Julian, who had taken the lead in blasphemy, closed the subject by observing “The popular Gods should be denied but respected.”

“Yet you couple women and wine in your banquet-room” said Erinna.

“Ah, my friend, I only observe Nature’s ordinances: in social life sex does not exist. Besides conversation requires speech as well as reason.”

“You insinuate?”

“Nature gave man reason, speech to woman.”

The men laughed.

“I will quote you two sentences from my new catechism, Julian” said Helen Woodward. “To what end has man used reason? To make Truth incredible. To what purpose has woman employed speech? To say nothing.”

Julian felt that the tone of talk was becoming too serious and he glided away from the subject. During the flow of the wine someone coupled the names of Aphrodite and Bacchus.

“Ah yes” said Julian “how is it that we have not honoured the goddess who presides over this feast?”

“Let Julian do it in his master’s fashion” suggested Corydon.

“I cannot tread beaten ground, Lionel.”

“Ah but Love is as bottomless as the sea.”

“Yet Plato was an excellent diver and brought up the richest pearls.”
“Scarcely in one dive, Julian” said Powell.
“In five, if I remember aright.”
“Yet Agathon’s pearl was not flawless.”
“Do you propose to amend it?”
“I should but spoil it; but I could dive for a pearl of my own finding perhaps.”
“You shall have a rich meed of praise.”
“But, my dear critic” said Erinna “what ground was untrod by Plato?”
“Agathon painted the loveliness of Love but not Love himself.”
“Describe him then you” said Julian and raised his hand for silence.

Powell lay back a moment with his dark Welsh eyes fixed upon the ceiling and then spoke.
“Told to describe Love” began Powell “yet in order to describe I must first define. And how is that possible with a being intangible as the air and inconstant as the moon? For Love is as slippery and mutable as Proteus, chameleon-hued, multiform, amorphous, infinite; the transmigrations of a Hindu soul are not more various and elastic; the harmony of his outlines are not blurred by chaos or the weird; rather like poetry and summer he wraps himself in a cool soft robe of velvet air and his feet are kissed by the laughing sea. But the translucent air which promises to reveal is a cloak far thicker than the gathering dusk. Thus the Eros of Praxiteles is not Love himself but the soul of the sculptor in one of her phases. Yet though Love has no one form, the idea, the soul of Love, that strange essence which walks for ever in the peopled Shadow-land, he is shackled in a single and uniform shape. How then shall I paint the idea of Love? The Greeks have described a child with a warlike bow of horn and bitter arrows tipped with steel, and modern poets inspired by this rude conception have fabled of the smart which is the herald of Love’s shaft. But these ideas however happy in themselves are by no means suitable to Love; for they are without two of his most essential elements, the subtle and the impalpable. The Hindus are more felicitous when they sing of Kama — for poetry
alone can express him — the divine and radiant youth mounted on [an] emerald parrot, and bearing in his right hand a bow of flowers; the arrows too must be of the same soft and voluptuous material — for a preference I would name the shefali, the only blossom which has a soul. For Love’s arrow never pains while in the wound — it is too subtle and flower-like — if a lover is in pain, it is because he loves himself more than Love — and that is the fault of Nature, not of Eros. Again Love has been painted as blind; and in this too the poets of Europe have conceived a lyrical fiction; for they say that Love looses his shafts and knows not whom they strike, whereas indeed he knows too well. It is his delight to unite those who should never have so much as met and to blind them to their own misery until the shefali arrow has withered in their hearts; and this he does with eyes open and of deliberate purpose. So far poets have sinned; but it is a vulgar error to suppose Love garrulous, a bastard child of Momus and Aphrodite; whereas in truth he is the lawful son of Hephaistos; but he has swallowed his father down, and for that reason those lovely lips, the scarlet portals of Passion’s treasury, do not yield up their store of pearls and rubies — nay dare not so much as open lest Hephaistos escape and in his anger blast the world.

“Thus then I paint Love.”

A murmur of applause flew like a wild spirit from mouth to mouth.

“Record me a confirmed Pythagorean” said Julian “the soul of Agathon did not perish in Macedonia.”

“Yet I dare say, Vernon” replied Erinna “you do not believe a word of what Agathon has been saying.”

“Yet your belief is the bastard of Momus rather than the heir of Peitho” rejoined Helen Woodward.

“I confess, Powell” replied Julian “that the manner pleased me better than the matter.”

“Your reason, Julian?”

“Your picture was too beautiful to be true.”

“That is a recommendation” said Erinna.

“To the artist but not to the critic.”

“How would you define Love, Julian?” asked Corydon.
“Give me a moment to think.”
“You will be harshly criticised.”
“Heine speed me! How will this do — the smile of a drunken God.”
There was applause.
“Ah but it is perfect” exclaimed Dufresne between a laugh and a sigh.
“But Marc might give us a better” suggested Philip.
“In its own way” assented Marc “Love is spiritual champagne, the best of wines if the briefest.”
The characteristic answer set the echoes rocking to Homeric mirth.
“A poisonous purple flower” said Helen “but its chalice collects the pure wine of heaven.”
“It is the paean of the soul heavenward or its dithyramb hell-ward” subjoined Corydon.
O’Ruark dissented. “It is a strange mania which everyone is bound to catch, mostly at a certain age — in short the spiritual measles.”
A burst of laughter greeted this Irish flight.
“Love is a runner in the race of life with the parsley wreath of joy for his prize” said Philip, formulating the sensations of the moment in an aphorism.
“Alas, to wear it for a day” said Pattison Ely “he is the bridegroom of Sin and the father of Satiety.”
“Ah no, but the child of Sin” corrected Julian “beautiful child of a more beautiful mother.”
“Is it not Sin itself” suggested Erinna “Sin, the true philosopher’s stone which turns life from dull lead to gold.”
“What is Sin?” asked Julian smiling.
“The invention of spiritual alchemists; it turns a leaden life to gold.”
“A modern discovery, I think” said Powell.
“A modern revival” corrected Erinna “they lost the secret in the Dark Ages; that is why the history of the time is so dull. Sin was legalised and therefore gave no pleasure.”
Julian laughed.
“You have given me what I have long been in search of.”
“What is that, Julian?”
“A good reason for the existence of Laws.”
Erinna smiled and went on. “They lost the secret of Love too and found in its place the gorgeous phantasm of chivalry. I maintain that Love is only a form of Sin.”
“Yet they recognise marriage.”
“They raise a monument over the corpse of Love.”
“She who could best tell us what Love is, sits silent” said Helen Woodward, looking at Ella.
“It is the sole motive of man’s existence” replied Ella. It was the first time she had opened her lips but the thought in her mind leaped out before she could bring it back.
There was tender laughter as of disillusioned September lenient to the emerald hopes of April; yet in the company no one save only Julian had passed the farther bourne of youth. In these days men live too fast to reckon their age by years.
But Helen Woodward looked at Ella with a world of compassion in her beautiful wild eyes.
Night flew on wingèd feet and the wine was in their speech.
At last the ladies rose and left the room; to the heart of Ella it seemed as [incomplete]