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THE COMPARISON OF FABIVS WITH PERICLES

by Plutarch

translated by John Dryden

WE have here had two lives rich in examples, both of civil and military excellence. Let us first compare the two men in their warlike capacity. Pericles presided in his commonwealth when it was in its most flourishing and opulent condition, great and growing in power; so that it may be thought it was rather the common success and fortune that kept him from any fall or disaster. But the task of Fabius, who undertook the government in the worst and most difficult times, was not to preserve and maintain the well-established felicity of a prosperous state, but to raise and uphold a sinking and ruinous commonwealth. Besides, the victories of Cimon, the trophies of Myronides and Leocrates, with the many famous exploits of Tolmides, were employed by Pericles rather to fill the city with festive entertainments and solemnities than to enlarge and secure its empire. Whereas, Fabius, when he took upon him the government, had the frightful object before his eyes of Roman armies destroyed, of their generals and consuls slain, of lakes and plains and forests strewed with the dead bodies, and rivers stained with the blood of his fellow-citizens; and yet, with his mature and solid counsels, with the firmness of his resolution, he, as it were, put his shoulder to the falling commonwealth, and kept it up from foundering through the failings and weaknesses of others. Perhaps it may be more easy to govern a city broken and tamed with calamities and adversity, and compelled by danger and necessity to listen to wisdom, than to set a bridle on wantonness and temerity, and rule a people pampered and restive with long prosperity as were the Athenians when Pericles held the reins of government. But then again, not to be daunted nor discomposed with the vast heap of calamities under which the people of Rome at that time groaned and succumbed, argues a courage in Fabius and a strength of purpose more than ordinary.

We may set Tarentum retaken against Samos won by Pericles, and the conquest of Euboea we may well balance with the towns of Campania; though Capua itself was reduced by the consuls Fulvius and Appius. I do not find that Fabius won any set battle but that against the Ligurians, for which he had his triumph; whereas Pericles erected nine trophies for as many victories obtained by land and by sea. But no action of Pericles can be compared to that memorable rescue of Minucius, when Fabius redeemed both him and his army from utter destruction; a noble act combining the highest valour, wisdom, and humanity. On the other side, it does not appear that Pericles was ever so overreached as Fabius was by Hannibal with his flaming oxen. His enemy there had, without his agency, put himself accidentally into his power, yet Fabius let him slip in the night, and, when day came, was worsted by him, was anticipated in the moment of success, and mastered by his prisoner. If it is the part of a good general, not only to provide for the present, but also to have a clear foresight of things to come, in this point Pericles is the superior; for he admonished the Athenians, and told them beforehand the ruin the war would bring upon them, by their grasping more than they were able to manage. But Fabius was not so good a prophet, when he denounced to the Romans that the undertaking of Scipio would be the destruction of the commonwealth. So that Pericles was a good prophet of bad success, and Fabius was a bad prophet of success that was good. And,

indeed, to lose an advantage through diffidence is no less blamable in a general than to fall into danger for want of foresight; for both these faults, though of a contrary nature, spring from the same root, want of judgment and experience.

As for their civil policy, it is imputed to Pericles that he occasioned the war, since no terms of peace, offered by the Lacedaemonians, would content him. It is true, I presume, that Fabius, also, was not for yielding any point to the Carthaginians, but was ready to hazard all, rather than lessen the empire of Rome. The mildness of Fabius towards his colleague Minucius does, by way of comparison, rebuke and condemn the exertions of Pericles to banish Cimon and Thucydides, noble, aristocratic men, who by his means suffered ostracism. The authority of Pericles in Athens was much greater than that of Fabius in Rome. Hence it was more easy for him to prevent miscarriages arising from the mistakes and insufficiency of other officers; only Tolmides broke loose from him, and, contrary to his persuasions, unadvisedly fought with the Boeotians, and was slain. The greatness of his influence made all others submit and conform themselves to his judgment. Whereas Fabius, sure and unerring himself, for want of that general power, had not the means to obviate the miscarriages of others; but it had been happy for the Romans if his authority had been greater, for so, we may presume, their disasters had been fewer.

As to liberality and public spirit, Pericles was eminent in never taking any gifts, and Fabius, for giving his own money to ransom his soldiers, though the sum did not exceed six talents. Than Pericles, meantime, no man had ever greater opportunities to enrich himself, having had presents offered him from so many kings and princes and allies, yet no man was ever more free from corruption. And for the beauty and magnificence of temples and public edifices with which he adorned his country, it must be confessed, that all the ornaments and structures of Rome, to the time of the Caesars, had nothing to compare, either in greatness of design or of expense, with the lustre of those which Pericles only erected at Athens.

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