

# Letters

## Swiss on Wry

Gumligen bei Bern  
Switzerland

### FRIENDS:

All my friends here in Switzerland are howling with laughter at the superbly reproduced photographs of the gesturing professors in your October issue. As for myself I think that this issue will help sell my books and give me some retirement income in addition to that pitiful TIAA pension. But not only that, people will be tempted to invite me in person to see that body style. In fact the Scots want me up there next year for six months, not only to improve their English but also to limber up their bodies, both for lecturing and for skiing and mountain climbing.

Next week I am supposed to give a speech in Berlin, under the auspices of the Mayor of Berlin, and as a courtesy of the Los Angeles-West Berlin "Sister Cities." That might be lots of fun if I do not have to buy or rent a tuxedo for the occasion. Mine, which I bought for the 75th anniversary of Caltech and wore just once, is back in Pasadena.

Hoping that the minister of finances at CIT did not give you a talking to for spending so much money on my grimaces, and with best wishes.

FRITZ ZWICKY  
Professor of Astronomy  
Emeritus

## Communication Gap

San Francisco

### SIRS:

Many of us in the sheltered industrial world have difficulty keeping pace with academic terminology. This is especially the case with the language of the humanities.

I write to inquire if you could obtain a translation from Dean Huttenback of the profound expression at the top of the outside column, page 35, of the C. J. Pings account of "The Life in a Day with the Faculty Board" in the November *Engineering and Science*.

D. C. CAMPBELL  
Bechtel Corporation

*We refuse to believe that the sheltered industrial world is so far removed from the hurly-burly groves of academe that its inhabitants are unable to translate such an elementary expression as Dean Huttenback's*  
"@ # ~ / % & !"

## New Year's Resolutions—Memnon of Nineveh and His Effort to be

Pasadena

### EDITOR:

Illness has confined me to my home in recent weeks and, during this time, I have been reading again some of the writings of Voltaire. (I have a complete set of his works, by the way, 45 volumes bound in the original calf and printed just 200 years ago. This was a prized possession of my maternal grandfather, William Joseph Kerr, a member of the same Scottish family as that of the physicist who discovered the Kerr effect.)

This story, in particular, so pleased me, and seemed so appropriate for this time of year, when we all make long lists of virtuous resolutions for the New Year, that I have translated it and hereby send it on to you in the hope that you can share it with all your readers, who have, of course, just finished making *their* long lists of virtuous resolutions.

JESSE W. M. DUMOND  
Professor of Physics  
Emeritus

Memnon conceived one day the well-nigh unattainable ideal of becoming perfectly wise and prudent. There are in fact very few men to whom this sort of foolishness has not occurred at one time or another. Memnon said to himself: To be very wise and prudent and consequently very happy is very simple! It is sufficient to be devoid of passions or desires; and nothing could be easier, as everyone knows. In the first place I will never become infatuated with women; for upon seeing a gorgeous beauty I will say to myself: Those rose-petal cheeks will some day be wrinkled, those magnificent eyes will be bordered with red, that appealing throat and bosom will become flat and pendant, that beautiful head will lose its glorious hair. So all I have to do is to look at her at present through the same eyes with which I must expect to see her later and without doubt her head could not conceivably succeed in turning mine.

In the next place I resolve always to be strictly sober. I shall never permit myself to be tempted by excesses of delicious food and excellent wine nor by the attractive seductions of elegant society. I will need only to bear in mind what results from such excesses—a heavy head, an embarrassed stomach, the loss of one's reason, his health and his precious time. I will eat therefore only just enough to meet my need; my health will consequently always be good and my ideas always pure and brilliant. All the foregoing seems to me so easy that, to tell the truth, there will be little merit in achieving it!

Next, said Memnon, I must think a little about my money. My desires are moderate, my portfolio is securely invested with the treasurer general of finances of Nineveh. I have enough income to live on independently; this is one of the greatest pieces of good fortune imaginable. I shall never be under the cruel necessity to ask favors of anyone; I shall envy no one and no one shall envy me. Here again is something exceedingly easy to attain.

I have friends, he continued; I shall keep them because they will have no cause for dispute with me. I will never be angry with them, nor will they be vexed with me. All that should present no difficulty whatsoever.

Having thus formulated his little plan of prudence and wisdom in his chambers, Memnon looked out the window. He saw two ladies sauntering under the plane trees near his house. One was quite young, very attractive, and seemed deeply upset about something. She was sighing and weeping and as a result looked only the more fetchingly adorable.

Our sage, Memnon, was naturally deeply touched, not by the beauty of the young lady (he would of course not have permitted himself to indulge in such a weakness) but solely by the afflictions from which she was obviously suffering. He came downstairs and accosted the young lady, with the intention of consoling her with wise advice. The beauty recounted to him in the most naive and touching manner all the wrong being done to her by an Uncle (who did not exist); with what dishonest artifices he had stolen from her certain property (which in fact she had never possessed), and all the fear she felt of violence which he might inflict upon her.

"You seem to me to be such a wise and trustworthy young man," she said to Memnon, "that if you would consent to come to my house and examine my affairs, I feel certain that you could help me escape from the embarrassing situation in which I find myself at present." Memnon showed no hesitation in following her to investigate the matter and give her his considered council.

The afflicted young lady escorted him to a perfumed chamber and had him sit down beside her politely on a large sofa. The young lady spoke with lowered eyelids, from beneath which occasionally tears touchingly escaped, and which, as she raised them, invariably encountered those of our wise and sympathetic friend, Memnon. Their discourse was full of such tenderness and sympathy that it redoubled every time their eyes met. Memnon took her affairs extremely to heart and felt, from one moment to the next, an increasing desire to oblige and assist so honest and so unhappy a young thing! Almost unconsciously they came

## Perfectly Wise and Good

closer and closer to each other. Memnon in fact counseled her so intimately and gave her such tender advice that neither the one nor the other were able to talk or think about business, and indeed they lost complete track of where they were!

At this precise juncture, the Uncle arrived, just as one might well have expected. He was armed from head to foot. The first thing he said was that, for good and sufficient reason, he would kill both our sage Memnon and the beautiful Niece; but his last remark was that he could pardon them for consideration of a very large sum of money. Memnon was obliged to give him all the cash he had. In those days one was lucky to escape from such a scrape so cheaply! America had not as yet been discovered and afflicted ladies were far from being as dangerous as they are today.

Memnon in shame and desperation returned to his home. There he found a note inviting him to have dinner with some of his intimate friends. If I stay alone at home, he said to himself, I will be depressed thinking of this unfortunate adventure of mine; I won't eat and will fall sick thinking about it. It will be wiser to go and dine frugally with my intimate friends. Thus I may be able to forget, in the sweetness of my society with them, the foolishness I have gotten myself into this morning.

Thus Memnon went to the rendezvous, where his friends found him distinctly depressed. They offered him some of their best wine to cheer him up. A little wine in moderation is a remedy for both soul and body, thought Memnon, and as a result he became inebriated. His hosts proposed a game of cards after the meal. "A well-regulated game with one's good friends is an honest pastime." So they played and won from him everything in his purse and four times as much again against his word. A dispute arose about the game and they became angry; one of his intimate friends threw a dice box at his head and put out one of his eyes. They carried the wise Memnon home, drunk, penniless, and minus one of his eyes!

After recovering somewhat from his wine, he sent his valet to get some more money from the treasurer general of the bank of Nineveh, to pay off the debt to his intimate friends; he learned that his debtor, with whom his capital was invested, had that morning gone into a fraudulent bankruptcy, putting a hundred families who had invested in his business into grave alarm. Memnon, in outrage, went to the Court with a plaster on his eye and a plea in his hand to demand justice from the King against the fraudulent bankrupt. . . .

Memnon hid himself in a corner waiting for the moment when he could throw him-

self at the feet of the monarch. The moment arrived, he bowed thrice to the ground, and presented his plea. His gracious majesty received him favorably and turned the memoir over to one of his Satraps to investigate it. The Satrap drew Memnon aside and said with insolent official sarcasm: "You are an amusing one-eyed guy! To dare to address your complaint to the King instead of to me—and, even funnier yet, to demand justice against an honest bankrupt whom I honor with my protection, and who is the nephew of one of my mistresses' chambermaids. I advise you to drop this affair, my friend, if you wish to preserve the one eye you have remaining."

Memnon, having thus that morning renounced women, all excesses of the table, gambling, quarreling, and especially pleading in court, had, before nightfall, been deceived and robbed by a beautiful woman, become stone drunk, gambled away his funds, had a quarrel, got one of his eyes blinded forever, and been to court where he had been mocked at as a laughing stock.

Petrified with astonishment, suffering from physical and moral pain, he went back home with suicide in his heart. He tried to enter his home and found the sheriff, sent there by his creditors and removing his furniture on their orders. He remained well-nigh unconscious, fainting under one of the plane trees . . . Night fell with Memnon sleeping on a bed of straw beside the wall of his house.

He was seized by a fever, and at its height he fell asleep and a celestial spirit appeared to him in a dream.

The spirit was resplendent with light. It had six beautiful wings but no feet, head, or tail and resembled nothing that we mortals are familiar with. "Who or what art thou?" said Memnon to this vision. "Thy good Genie," replied the other. "Give me back my eye, my health, my worldly possessions, my wisdom, and my prudence," said Memnon as he recounted how he had lost all these things in a single day. "Well those, you see, are adventures that never happen to us in the world we live in," said the spirit. "And what world *do* you inhabit?" said the poor afflicted human. "My country," the spirit replied, "is at five hundred million leagues from the sun in a tiny star in the neighborhood of Sirius, which you can see from here." "What a beautiful country that must be!" said Memnon. "Do you truly mean to say that where you live there are no gold diggers who are out to do a poor fellow out of his wealth, no intimate friends who cheat him at poker and make him blind in one eye, no fraudulent bankrupts, and no Satraps who

make fun of you and refuse you justice?" "No," said the inhabitant of the star, "nothing like that. We are never deceived by women because we don't have any; we never indulge in excessive culinary delights because we never eat; we don't have bankruptcies because where we live there is neither gold nor silver; no one can put out our eyes because we do not have bodies fashioned as yours are; and the Satraps never do us injustices because in our little star everyone is equal."

Then said Memnon: "My good Lord, without women or banquets, how do you good souls pass your time?" "Taking care, to the best of our ability, of the other worlds which are confided to us," replied the Genie. "Thou findest me here to console thee now." "Alas," replied Memnon, "if you could only have arrived last night, to have prevented me from making so many mistakes!" "I was with Hassan, your elder brother," said the celestial spirit. "He is worse off than you. His Gracious Majesty the Sultan of India, at whose court he had the honor to be serving, has had *both his eyes* blinded on account of a minor indiscretion, and at the present moment he is in prison with his feet and hands bound in chains." "Huh," said Memnon, "what's the use of having a good Genie in the family if, among two brothers, one has lost an eye and the other is totally blind, one sleeping outdoors on a bed of straw, the other in prison?" "Your luck will change," replied the creature from the star. "It is true that you will always be missing one eye, but except for that you'll be happy enough, provided in the future you never again try to attain the crazy ideal of being perfectly wise and prudent." "Is this therefore something beyond man's capacity to achieve?" "As impossible," replied the other, "as to be perfectly skillful, perfectly strong, perfectly powerful, or perfectly happy. Even we are very far from this. There is indeed a globe where all this perfection is to be found, but in the hundreds of millions of worlds that are dispersed through the depths of infinite space everything is ordered by degrees. There is less wisdom and pleasure in the second than in the first, less in the third than in the second, and so on down to the last, where everyone is completely demented." "I am sorely afraid," said Memnon, "that our terrestrial globe may be precisely one of those little mansions of this universe to which you refer!" "Not exactly," said the spirit, "but it is not far from it; everything has to be where it belongs." "Oh, but," said Memnon, "certain poets and philosophers make a terrible mistake when they say that 'everything is for the best.'" "No, they are entirely correct," said the philosopher from above, "if we consider the total arrangement of the entire Universe." "Ah, I shall believe in that," replied poor Memnon, "only when I shall have regained my lost eye!"