

**WIT AND WISDOM  
OF EPICTETUS**

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Wit and wisdom of Epictetus by Epictetus

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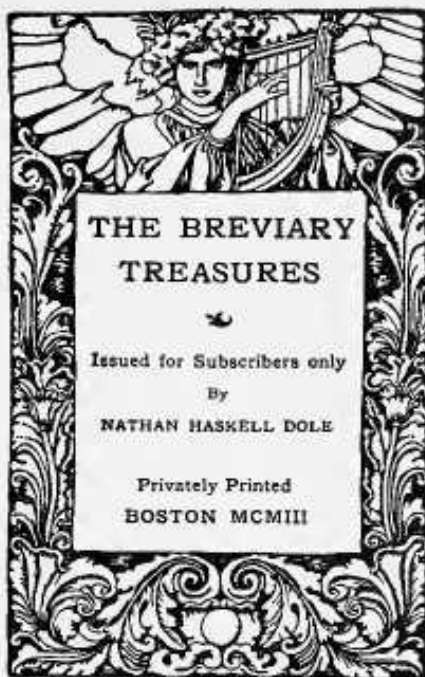
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BY NATHAN HASKELL DOLE

HENRY HOUGHTON STEPHENS



## INTRODUCTION

ST. AUGUSTINE called Epictetus the most noble of Stoics, and if we may judge of him by the utterances recorded by his disciple, Flavius Arrian, who took them down from his lips at Nicopolis, we cannot help agreeing with this encomium. Arrian declares that they were not put into literary form, were merely "such things as one man might say to another on occasion," but that they represent the highest thought of the Master who, when he spoke, had but one aim — "to stir his hearers' minds toward the best things."

Almost nothing is known of Epictetus' life. He was born in Hieropolis, near the Phrygian Meander. He became the slave of Epaphroditus, whose character may be surmised when it is stated that he was the favourite of the Emperor Nero. There is a legend to the effect that Epaphroditus, who had himself been a slave, was twisting Epictetus' leg for

amusement. Epictetus remarked, "If you persist, you will break my leg." Epaphroditus went on and broke the leg. Epictetus' only comment was: "Did I not warn you that you would break my leg?"

However cruelly the master may have treated the slave, he sent him to attend the lectures on philosophy by Musonius Rufus, the son of a Roman knight, and a very celebrated Stoic, whose works have unfortunately all perished. Just as Russian noblemen used to have poets and musicians among their serfs, so the Romans were proud to attach philosophers and scholars to their retinues. Often, undoubtedly, the prisoner of war, sold as a slave, may have been a man of more consequence than his fortuitous owner. Nero, whose cruelties and excesses were beginning to stir the Romans to revolt, committed suicide with the aid of Epaphroditus in 67 A. D. Epaphroditus himself was put to death by Domitian, and when that cruel emperor expelled all the philosophers from Rome with the exception of Muso-

nus Rufus, Epictetus went to Nicopolis, the city of Augustus, at the southwestern extremity of Epirus. Here he lived to a venerable old age in spite of his feeble health and his lameness. He is said to have been true to his own teachings, to have lived with the utmost simplicity, with no servant or other inmate of his house. A story illustrating his kindness of heart relates how he rescued an infant that had been exposed to death by some parent who had wished to check the growth of his family. Epictetus took the child and hired a nurse to care for it and brought it up.

The philosophy of Stoicism, as expounded in the fragmentary sentences of Epictetus, is unquestionably conducive to a happy life, a life of serenity. It is not strange that Epictetus should have been adopted by the Christian Church: the *Encheiridion* or Handbook has the distinction of being the only pagan book recommended to the religious. It deserves it. For it certainly helps men to be manly, to endure afflictions without repining, to take life as it comes, to be