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The Works of George Lord Lyttleton

Lyttelton, George <Lord>

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XXVII. Mercury - And a modern fine Lady.

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perate nation from growing ferocious, a rich one from becoming entirely sensual and debauched. Every gift of the gods is sometimes abused; but wit and fine talents by a natural law gravitate towards virtue: accidents may drive them out of their proper direction; but such accidents are a sort of prodigies, and, like other prodigies, it is an alarming omen, and of dire portent to the times. For if virtue cannot keep to her allegiance those men, who in their hearts confess her divine right, and know the value of her laws, on whose fidelity and obedience can she depend? May such geniuses never descend to flatter vice, encourage folly, or propagate irreligion; but exert all their powers in the service of virtue, and celebrate the noble choice of those, who, like you, preferred her to pleasure!

DIALOGUE XXVII.

MERCURY—And a modern fine LADY.

MRS. MODISH.

INDEED, Mr. Mercury, I cannot have the pleasure of waiting upon you now. I am engaged, absolutely engaged.

MERCURY.

I know you have an amiable affectionate husband, and several fine children; but you need not be told, that neither conjugal attachments, maternal affections, nor even the care of a kingdom's welfare or a nation's glory, can excuse a person who has received a summons to the realms of death. If the grim messenger was not as peremptory as unwelcome, Charon would not get a passenger (except now and then an hypochondriacal Englishman) once in a century. You must be content to leave your husband and family, and pass the Styx.

MRS.

I did not mean to insist on any engagement with my husband and children; I never thought myself engaged to them. I had no engagements but such as were common to women of my rank. Look on my chimney-piece, and you will see I was engaged to the play on Mondays, balls on Tuesdays, the opera on Saturdays, and to card-assemblies the rest of the week, for two months to come; and it would be the rudest thing in the world not to keep my appointments. If you will stay for me till the summer-season, I will wait on you with all my heart. Perhaps the Elysian fields may be less detestable than the country in our world. Pray have you a fine Vauxhall and Ranelagh? I think I should not dislike drinking the Lethe waters when you have a full season.

MERCURY.

Surely you could not like to drink the waters of oblivion, who have made pleasure the busines, end, and aim of your life! It is good to drown cares: but who would wash away the remembrance of a life of gaiety and pleasure?

MRS. MODISH.

Diversion was indeed the busines of my life, but as to pleasure I have enjoyed none since the novelty of my amusements was gone off. Can one be pleased with seeing the same thing over and over again? Late hours and fatigue gave me the vapours, spoiled the natural chearfulness of my temper, and even in youth wore away my youthful vivacity.

MERCURY.

If this way of life did not give you pleasure, why did you continue in it? I suppose you did not think it was very meritorious.

MRS. MODISH.

I was too much engaged to think at all: so far indeed my manner of life was agreeable enough. My friends always told me

me diversions were necessary, and my doctor assured me dissipation was good for my spirits; my husband insisted that it was not, and you know that one loves to oblige one's friends, comply with one's doctor, and contradict one's husband; and besides I was ambitious to be thought *du bon ton* *.

MERCURY.

Bon ton! what is that, Madam? Pray define it.

MRS. MODISH.

Oh Sir, excuse me, it is one of the privileges of the *bon ton*, never to define, or be defined. It is the child and the parent of jargon. It is—I can never tell you what it is: but I will try to tell you what it is not. In conversation, it is not wit; in manners, it is not politeness; in behaviour, it is not address; but it is a little like them all. It can only belong to people of a certain rank, who live in a certain manner, with certain persons, who have not certain virtues, and who have certain vices, and who inhabit a certain part of the town. Like a place by courtesy, it gets an higher rank than the person can claim, but which those who have a legal title to precedence dare not dispute, for fear of being thought not to understand the rules of politeness. Now, Sir, I have told you as much as I know of it, though I have admired and aimed at it all my life.

MERCURY.

Then, Madam, you have wasted your time, faded your beauty, and destroyed your health, for the laudable purposes of contradicting your husband, and being this something and this nothing called the *bon ton*.

MRS. MODISH.

What would you have had me do?

* *Du bon ton* is a cant phrase in the modern French language for the fashionable air of conversation and manners.

MERCURY.

MERCURY.

I will follow your mode of instructing. I will tell you what I would not have had you do. I would not have had you sacrifice your time, your reason, and your duties, to fashion and folly. I would not have had you neglect your husband's happiness, and your children's education.

MRS. MODISH.

As to the education of my daughters, I spared no expence; they had a dancing-master, music-master, and drawing-master; and a French governess, to teach them behaviour and the French language.

MERCURY.

So their religion, sentiments, and manners, were to be learnt from a dancing-master, music-master, and a chamber maid! Perhaps they might prepare them to catch the *bon ton*. Your daughters must have been so educated as to fit them to be wives without conjugal affection, and mothers without maternal care. I am sorry for the sort of life they are commencing, and for that which you have just concluded. Minos is a four old gentleman, without the least smattering of the *bon ton*, and I am in a fright for you. The best thing I can advise you is, to do in this world as you did in the other; keep happiness in your view, but never take the road that leads to it. Remain on this side Styx; wander about without end or aim; look into the Elysian fields, but never attempt to enter into them, lest Minos should push you into Tartarus: for duties neglected may bring on a sentence not much less severe than crimes committed.

DIALOGUE XXVIII.

PLUTARCH.—CHARON.—And a modern BOOKSELLER.

CHARON.

HERE is a fellow who is very unwilling to land in our territories. He says he is rich, has a great deal of business in the other world, and must needs return to it: he is so troublesome