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Miscellaneous works Of The Late Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl Of Chesterfield

Consisting Of Letters to his Friends, never before printed, And Various
Other Articles

**Chesterfield, Philip Dormer Stanhope of
Dublin, 1777**

XVI. Common Sense. Saturday, Feb. 11, 1738. N° 54.

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XVI.

COMMON SENSE.

SATURDAY, Feb. 11, 1738. N^o 54.

"Ne vitam transeant, veluti pecora; quæ natura prona, atque ventri obedientia finxit." SALLUST.

Lest they should pass their time like the beasts, which are by nature disposed to grovel upon this earth, and be slaves to their bellies.

TASTE is now the fashionable word of the fashionable world. Every thing must be done with taste: that is settled; but where and what that taste is, is not quite so certain, for, after all the pains I have taken to find out what was meant by the word, and whether those who use it offensively had any clear idea annexed to it, I have only been able negatively to discover that they do not mean their own natural taste; but, on the contrary, that they have sacrificed it to an imaginary one, of which they can give no account. They build houses in taste, which they cannot live in with conveniency*; they suffer with impatience the music they pretend to hear with rapture, and they even eat nothing they like, for the sake of eating in taste.

Not for himself, he sees, or hears, or eats,
Artists must chuse his pictures, music, meats.

POPE.

It is certain the commandments, now so much neglected, if not abrogated, might be observed with much less self-denial, than these imaginary laws of taste, to which so exact and scrupulous an obedience is paid.

I take taste, when not used for the sensation of the palate, which is its proper signification, to be a metaphor, to express that judgment each man forms to himself of those things, which are not contained in any certain rules,

* This was the case of a general, who, having applied to an English nobleman, celebrated for his taste in architecture, to direct the building of a house for himself, had one constructed indeed with great elegance and regularity on the outside, but altogether destitute of every convenience for a family to live in. Lord Chesterfield upon seeing it, told the general, if I had your house, I would hire the opposite one to live in, and enjoy the prospect.

rules, and which admit of no demonstration; thus circles and equilateral triangles allow of no taste, they must be as they are; but the colors they are drawn in, or the materials they are made of, depend upon fancy or taste.—In building, there are certain necessary rules founded upon nature, as, that the stronger must support the weaker, &c. but the ornamental and convenient parts are the objects of taste. Hence arises the propriety of the metaphor, because taste in every thing is undetermined and personal, as in the palate and all our other senses; nay even our minds are as differently affected as our palates, by the same things, when those things are not of a nature to be ascertained and demonstrated.

However, this right of tasting for one's self, which seems to be the natural privilege of mankind, is now totally surrendered even in the proper sense of the word; and if a man would be well received in good company, he must eat, though with reluctance, according to the laws of some eminent glutton at Paris, promulgated here by the last-imported French cook, wishing all the while within himself, that he durst avow his natural taste, for good native beef and pudding.

The absurdity, as well as the real ill consequences, of this prevailing affectation, has, I confess excited my wrath; and I resolved that the nobility and gentry of this kingdom should not go on to ruin their fortunes and constitutions, without hearing at least the representations and admonitions of common sense.

Eating, itself, seems to me, to be rather a subject of humiliation than of pride, since the imperfection of our nature appears, in the daily necessity we lie under of recruiting it in that manner. So that one would think the only care of a rational being should be, to repair his decaying fabric as cheap as possible. But the present fashion is directly contrary: and eating, now, is the greatest pride, business, and expence of life, and that too, not to support, but to destroy nature.

The frugal meal was antiently the time of unbending the mind by chearful and improving conversation, and the table-talk of ingenious men has been thought worth transmitting to posterity. The meal is now at once the most frivolous and most serious part of life. The mind is bent to the utmost, and all the attention exerted, for
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what? The critical examination of compound dishes; and if any two or three people happen to start some useful or agreeable subject of conversation, they are soon interrupted, and overpowered by the extatic interjections of, excellent! exquisite! delicious! Pray taste this, you never eat a better thing in your life. Is that good? Is it tender? Is it seasoned enough? Would it have been better so? Of such wretched stuff as this does the present table-talk wholly consist, in open defiance of all conversation and common sense. I could heartily wish that a collection of it were to be published for the honor and glory of the performers; but for want of that, I shall give my readers a short specimen of the most ingenious table-talk, I have lately heard carried on with most wit and spirit.

My lord, having tasted and duly considered the Bechamele, shook his head, and then offered as his opinion to the company, that the garlic was not enough concealed, but earnestly desired to know their sentiments, and begged they would taste it with attention.

The company, after proper deliberation, replied, that they were of his lordship's opinion, and that the garlic did indeed distinguish itself too much: but the *maître d'hôtel* interposing represented, that they were now stronger than ever in garlic at Paris; upon which the company one and all said, that altered the case.

My lord, having sagaciously smelt at the breech of a rabbit, wiped his nose, gave a shrug of some dissatisfaction, and then informed the company, that it was not absolutely a bad one, but that he heartily wished it had been kept a day longer. Ay, said Sir Thomas, with an emphasis, a rabbit must be kept. And with the guts in too, added the colonel, or the devil could not eat it. Here the *maître d'hôtel* again interposed, and said that they eat their rabbits much sooner now than they used to do at Paris. Are you sure of that? said my lord, with some vivacity. Yes, replied the *maître d'hôtel*, the cook had a letter about it last night. I am not sorry for that, rejoined my lord; for, to tell you the truth, I naturally love to eat my meat before it stinks. The rest of the company, and even the colonel himself, confessed the same.

This ingenious and edifying kind of conversation continued, without the least interruption from common sense, through

through four courses, which lasted four hours, till the company could neither swallow nor utter any thing more.

A very great person among the antients was very properly asked, if he was not ashamed to play so well upon the fiddle? And one may surely with as much reason ask these illustrious moderns, if they are not ashamed of being such good cooks.

It is really not to be imagined with what profound knowledge and erudition our men of quality now treat these culinary subjects, and I cannot but hope that such excellent critics will at last turn authors themselves; nay, I daily expect to see a digest of the whole art of cookery by some person of honor.

I cannot help hinting, by the way, to these accurate kitchen critics, that it does not become them to be facetious and satyrical upon those dissertations, which ladies sometimes hold upon their dress, the subject being by no means so low nor so trifling.

Though such a degree of affected gluttony, accompanied with such frivolous discourses, is pardonable in those who are little superior to the animals they devour, and who are only *fruges consumere nati*, I am surprized and hurt when I see men of parts fall into it, since it not only suspends the exercise of their parts for the present, but impairs them, together with their health, for the future; and if fools could contrive, I should think they had contrived this method of bringing men of sense down to them; for it is certain, that when a company is thus gorged, glutted, and loaded, there is not the least difference between the most stupid and the wittiest man in it.

What life in all that ample body, say
 What heavenly particle inspires the clay?
 The soul subsides, and wickedly inclines
 To seem but mortal even in fount divines.

POPE.

Though an excess in wine is highly blameable, it is surely much more pardonable, as the progressive steps to it are chearful, animating, and seducing: the melancholy are for a while relieved, the grave are enlivened, and the witty and the gay seem almost inspired; whereas in eating, after nature is once satisfied, which she soon is, every additional morsel carries dulness and stupidity along with it.

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Moreover, these glorious toils are crowned with the just rewards of all chronical distempers; the gout, the stone, the scurvy, and the palsy, are the never-failing trophies of their atchievements. Were these honors, like simple knighthood, only to be enjoyed by those who had merited them, it would be no great matter; but unfortunately, like baronetship, they descend to and visit their innocent children. It is already very easy to distinguish at sight the puny son of a compound *entremets*, from the lusty offspring of beef and pudding: and I am persuaded, the next generation of the nobility will be a race of pale-faced, spindle-shanked Lilliputians, the most vigorous of whom will not come up to an abortion of John de Gaunt's. Nor does the mischief even stop here, for as the men of fashion frequently condescend to communicate themselves to families of inferior rank, but better constitutions, they enervate those families too, and present them with sickly helpless children, to the great prejudice of the trade and manufactures of this kingdom.

Some people have imagined, and not without some degree of probability, that animal food communicates its qualities with its nourishment. In this supposition it was, that Achilles, who was not only born, and bred, but fed up too for a Hero, was nourished with the marrow of lions; and we all know what a fine lion he turned out at last. Should this rule hold, it must be a melancholy reflection to consider, that the principal ingredients in the food of our principal nobility, is essence of swine.

The Egyptians, who were a wise nation, thought so much depended upon diet, that they dieted their kings, and prescribed by law both the quality and quantity of their food. It is much to be lamented, that those bills of fare are not preserved to this time, since they might have been of singular use in all monarchical governments; but it is reasonable to be conjectured, from the wisdom of that people, that they allowed their kings no aliments of a bilious or a choleric nature, and only such as sweetened their juices, cooled their blood, and enlivened their faculties, if they had any.

The common people of this kingdom are dieted by laws; for, by an act passed about two years ago, not less advantageous to the crown than to the people, the use of a liquor which destroyed both their minds and their bodies,

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dies, was wisely prohibited, and by repeated acts of parliament, their food is reduced to a very modest and wholesome proportion. Surely then the nobility and gentry of the kingdom deserve some attention too, not so much indeed for their own sakes, as for the sake of the public, which is in some measure under their care : for if a porter, when full of gin, could not do his business, I am apt to think a privy counsellor, when loaded with four courses, will but bungle at his.

Suppose, for instance, a number of persons, not over-lively at best, should meet of an evening to concert and deliberate upon public measures of the utmost consequence, grunting under the load and repletion of the strongest meats, panting almost in vain for breath, but quite in vain for thought, and reminded only of their existence by the unfavoury returns of an olio ; what good could be expected from such a consultation ? The best one could hope for would be, that they were only assembled for shew, and not for use ; not to propose or advise, but silently to submit to the orders of some one man there, who, feeding like a rational creature, might have the use of his understanding.

I would therefore recommend it to the consideration of the legislature, whether it may not be necessary to pass an act, to restrain the licentiousness of eating, and assign certain diets to certain ranks and stations. I would humbly suggest the strict vegetable as the properest ministerial diet, being exceedingly tender of those faculties in which the public is so highly interested, and very unwilling they should be clogged or incumbered.

But I do most seriously recommend it to those who, from their rank and situation in life, settle the fashions, and whose examples will in these sorts of things always be followed, that they will by their example, which will be more effectual than any law, not only put a stop to, but reform, the ridiculous, expensive, and pernicious luxury of tables ; they are the people whom all inferior ranks imitate, as far as they are able, and commonly much farther. It is their fatal example that has seduced the gentry, and people of smaller fortune, into this nasty and ruinous excess. Let their example then, at last, reclaim them, let those who are able
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to bear the expence, and known not to grudge it, give the first blow to this extravagant folly; let them avow their own natural taste, for nature is in every thing plain and simple, and gratify it decently, at a frugal and wholesome table, instead of purchasing stupidity and distempers at the expence of their time and their estates. And they may depend upon it, that a fashion so convenient, as to the fortunes and the constitutions of their fellow subjects, will chearfully be followed, and universally prevail, to the great advantage of the public.

XVII.

COMMON SENSE.

SATURDAY, March 4, 1738.

N^o 57.

I TOOK my leave some time ago of the daily silly Gazetteers, and promised to take no further notice of them; but then I only promised that impunity to their folly and absurdity. Now, whether they understood that amnesty to extend farther than I meant it, or whether, with the last three or four shillings paid them by Pounce with a P, they likewise received orders to be saucy and impertinent, I cannot tell; but be that as it will, they have of late been so impudently personal upon one worthy gentleman*, that I cannot help stepping a little out of my way to give them a kick: nor is this the greatest provocation they have given me; for, notwithstanding the regard I have for the character of that young gentleman, with whom they are so free, I am more incensed against them for disturbing the ashes of the dead, and for presuming, as they do, to touch Cicero with their impure and unhallowed hands. I therefore begin, by absolutely forbidding them even to mention,

* Mr. afterwards lord Lyttleton, who had been most grossly abused, both in doggrel verse, and in dull prose, by the authors of the Gazetteer.