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Montaigne's Essays

In Three Books. With Notes and Quotations. And an Account of The Author's Life ; With a short Character of the Author and Translator, by the late Marquis of Halifax; With the Addition of A Complete Table to each Volume

Montaigne, Michel Eyquem de

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Chap. 2. Of Sorrow.

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to revenge himself, and with all the Arms of a brave Despair to sweeten his own Death in the Death of an Enemy. Yet did their Virtue create no Pity, and the Length of one Day was not enough to satiate the Thirst of the Conqueror's Revenge; but the Slaughter continued to the last Drop of Blood that was capable of being shed, and stopp'd not till it met with none but naked and impotent Persons, old Men, Women, and Children, of them to carry away to the Number of thirty thousand Slaves.



C H A P. II.

Of Sorrow.

NO Man living is more free from this Passion than I, who neither like it in myself, nor admire it in others, and yet generally the World, (I know not why) is pleas'd to grace it with a particular Esteem, endeavouring to make us believe, that Wisdom, Virtue and Conscience shroud themselves under this grave and affected Appearance. Foolish and sordid Disguise! The *Italians* however, under the Denomination of *Un Tristo*, decypher a clandestine Nature, a dangerous and ill-natured Man: And with good Reason, it being a Quality always hurtful, always idle and vain, and as cowardly, mean, and base, by the *Stoicks* expressly, and particularly forbidden their Sages: But the Story nevertheless says, that *Psammenitus*, King of *Egypt*, being defeated and taken Prisoner by *Cambyfes* King of *Persia*, seeing his own Daughter pass by him in a wretched Habit, with a Bucket to draw Water, though his Friends about him were so concerned as to break out into Tears and Lamentations at the miserable Sight, yet he himself remain'd unmov'd, without uttering a Word of Discontent, with his Eyes fix'd upon the Ground: And seeing moreover his Son immediately after led to Execution, still maintain'd the same Gravity and Indifference; till spying at last one of his Domesticks dragg'd away amongst the Captives, he could then hold no longer, but fell to tearing his Hair, and beating his Breast, with all the other Extravagancies

vagancies of a wild and desperate Sorrow. A Story that may very fitly be coupled with another of the same kind, of a late Prince of our own Nation, who being at *Trent*, and having News there brought him of the Death of his elder Brother, but a Brother on whom depended the whole Support and Honour of his House, and soon after of that of a younger Brother, the second Hope of his Family, and having withstood these two Assaults with an exemplary Resolution, one of his Servants happening a few Days after to die, he suffered his Constancy to be overcome by this last Accident; and parting with his Courage, so abandon'd himself to Sorrow and Mourning, that some from thence were forward to conclude, that he was only touch'd to the Quick by this last Stroke of Fortune; but, in truth, it was that being before brim-full of Grief, the least Addition overflow'd the Bounds of all Patience. Which might also be said of the former Example, did not the Story proceed to tell us, that *Cambyzes* asking *Psammitus*, *Why, not being mov'd at the Calamity of his Son and Daughter, he should with so great Impatience bear the Misfortune of his Friend?* *It is* (answered he,) *because this last Affliction was only to be manifested by Tears, the two first exceeding all manner of Expression.* And peradventure something like this might be working in the Fancy of the ancient Painter, who being in the Sacrifice of *Iphigenia*, to represent the Sorrow of the Assistants proportionably to the several Degrees of Interest every one had in the Death of this fair innocent Virgin; and having in the other Figures laid out the utmost Power of his Art, when he came to that of her Father he drew him with a Veil over his Face, meaning thereby, that no kind of Countenance was capable of expressing such a Degree of Sorrow. Which is also the Reason why the Poets feign the miserable Mother *Niobe*, having first lost seven Sons, and successively as many Daughters, to be at last transform'd into a Rock;

Diriguisse malis *.

— Whom Grief alone,
Had Pow'r to stiffen into Stone.

* *Ovid. Met. lib. 6.*

Thereby

Thereby to exprefs, that melancholick, dumb, and deaf Stupidity, which benumbs all our Faculties when opprest with Accidents greater than we are able to bear; and indeed the Violence and Impreffion of an exceffive Grief, muft of Necessity aftonish the Soul, and wholly deprive her of her ordinary Functions: As it happens to every one of us, who upon any fudden Alarm of very ill News, find ourfelves surpriz'd, ftupified, and in a manner depriv'd of all Power of Motion, till the Soul, beginning to vent itfelf in Sighs and Tears, feems a little to free and difengage itfelf from the fudden Oppreffion, and to have obtain'd fome Room to work itfelf out at greater Liberty.

Et via vix tandem voci laxata dolore est.*

Yet fcarce at laft by ftuggling Grief a Gate
Unbolted is for Sighs to fall at.

In the War that *Ferdinand* made upon the Widow of King *John* of Hungary about *Buda*, a Man at Arms was particularly taken Notice of by every one for his fingular gallant Behaviour in a certain Encounter; unknown, highly commended, and as much lamented, being left dead upon the Place: But by none fo much as by *Raisciac* a German Lord, who was infinitely enamour'd of fo unparallel'd a Virtue. When the Body being brought off, and the Count with the common Curiofity coming to view it, the Arms were no fooner taken off, but he immediately knew him to be his own Son. A Thing that added a fecond Blow to the Compaffion of all the Beholders; only he, without uttering a Word, or turning away his Eyes from the woeful Object, flood fixtly contemplating the Body of his Son, till the Vehemency of Sorrow having overcome his vital Spirits, made him fink down ftone dead to the Ground.

Chi puo dir com' egli arde é in picciol fuoco †!

—What Tongue is able to proclaim
How his Soul melted in the gentle Flame?
fay the *Inamorato's* when they would represent an in-
fupportable Paflion.

‡ *Virg. Æneid, l. 11.* † *Petrarca, Sonetto 158.*

*Mifero quod omnes
Eripit sensus mihi. Nam simul te,
Lesbia, aspexi, nihil est super me
Quod loquar amens,
Lingua sed torpet tenuis, sub artus
Flamma dimanat, sonitu suopte
Tinniunt aures, gemina teguntur
Lumina nocte*.*

— all conquering *Lesbia*, thine Eyes
Have ravish'd from me all my Faculties :
At the first Glance of their victorious Ray,
I was so struck I knew not what to say ;
Nor had a Tongue to speak ; a subtle Flame
Crept thro' my Veins ; my tingling Ears became
Deaf without Noise, and my poor Eyes I found
With a black Veil of double Darkness bound.

Neither is it in the Height and greatest Fury of the Fit,
that we are in a Condition to pour out our Complaints, or
to fall into Courtship, the Soul being at that Time over-
burthened, and labouring with profound Thoughts : And
the Body dejected and languishing with Desire ; and thence
it is, that sometimes proceed those accidental Impotences
that so unseasonably surprize the willing Lover, and that
Frigidity which by the Force of an immoderate Ardour,
so unhappily seizes him even in the very Lap of Fruition :
For all Passions that suffer themselves to be relished and di-
gested are but moderate.

Curæ leves loquuntur, ingentes stupent †.

His Grief's but easy, who his Grief can tell,
But piercing Sorrow has no Article.

A Surprise of unexpected Joys does likewise often pro-
duce the same Effect.

*Ut me conspexit vententem, & Troia circum
Arma amens vidit, magnis exterrita monstis,
Dirigit visu in medio, calor ossa reliquit,
Labitur, & longo vix tandem tempore fatur ‡.*

* *Cat. Epig. 52.*
‡ *Ving. Aeneid.*

† *Seneca Hippol. Act. 2. Scen. 3.*

Soon

Soon as she saw me coming, and beheld
 The *Trojan* Ensigns waving in the Field,
 O'er-joy'd, and ravish'd at th' unlook'd for Sight,
 She turn'd a Statue, lost all feeling quite;
 Life's gentle Heat did her stiff Limbs forsake,
 See swoon'd, and scarce after long swooning spake.

To these we have the Examples of the *Roman* Lady, who died for Joy to see her Son safe returned from the Defeat of *Cannæ*; and of *Sophocles*, and *Dionysius* the Tyrant, who died of Joy; and of *Talva*, who died in *Corfica*, reading News of the Honours the *Roman* Senate had decreed in his Favour. We have moreover one, in the Time of Pope *Leo* the Tenth, who upon News of the taking of *Milan*, a Thing he had so ardently and passionately desired, was rapt with so sudden an Excess of Joy, that he immediately fell into a Fever and died. And for a more authentick Testimony of the Imbecillity of human Nature, it is recorded by the Ancients, that *Diodorus* the Logician died upon the Place, out of an extreme Passion of Shame, for not having been able in his own School, and in the Presence of a great Auditory, to disengage himself from a nice Argument that was propounded to him. I for my Part am very little subject to these violent Passions; I am naturally of a stubborn Apprehension, which also by Discourse I every Day harden and fortify more and more.



C H A P. III.

That our Affections carry themselves beyond us.

SUCH as accuse Mankind of the Folly of gaping and panting after future Things, and advise us to make our Benefits of those which are present, and to set up our Rest upon them, as having too short a Reach to lay hold upon that which is to come, and it being more impossible for us, than to retrieve what is past; have hit upon the most universal