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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

London, 1743

Chap. 18. That Men are not to judge of our Happiness till after Death.

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spoken of yet, a Passion that surpriseth us without any visible Cause, by an Impulse from Heaven; so that whole Armies and Nations have been struck with it. Such a one was that, which brought so wonderful a Desolation upon *Carthage*, where nothing was to be heard but Voices and Outcries of Fear, where the Inhabitants were seen to fall out of their Houses as to an Alarm, and there to charge, wound, and kill one another, as if they had been Enemies come to surprize their City. All Things were in strange Disorder and Fury, 'till with Prayers and Sacrifices they had appeas'd their Gods: And this is that they call a Panick Terror.



C H A P. XVIII.

*That Men are not to judge of our Happiness
'till after Death.*

— *scilicet ultima semper
Expectanda dies homini est, dicique beatus,
Ante obitum nemo supremaque funera debet* *.

Men's last Days still to be expected are,
E'er we of them our Judgments do declare;
Nor can't of any one be rightly said,
That he is happy, 'till he first be dead.

EVery one is acquainted with the Story of King *Cræsus* to this Purpose, who being taken Prisoner by *Cyrus*, and by him condemned to die, as he was going to Execution, cried out, *O Solon, Solon!* which being presently reported to *Cyrus*, and he sending to enquire of him what it meant, *Cræsus* gave him to understand, that he now found the Advertisement *Solon* had formerly given him true to his Cost, which was, That Men, however Fortune may smile upon them, could never be said to be happy, 'till they had

* *Ovid. Met. l. 3.*

been

been seen to pass over the last Day of their Lives, by Reason of the Uncertainty and Mutability of human Things, which upon very light and trivial Occasions are subject to be totally changed into a quite contrary Condition. And therefore it was, that *Agefilaus* made answer to one that was saying, what a happy young Man the King of *Persia* was, to come so young to so mighty a Kingdom: 'Tis true, (said he) but neither was *Priam* unhappy at his Years. In a short Time, of Kings of *Macedon*, Successors to that mighty *Alexander*, were made Joiners and Scriveners at *Rome*, of a Tyrant of *Sicily* a Pedant at *Corinth*, of a Conqueror of one half of the World, and General of so many Armies, a miserable Suppliant to the rascally Officers of a King of *Egypt*. So much the Prolongation of five or six Months of Life cost the great and noble *Pompey*, and no longer since than our Fathers Days, *Ludovico Sforza*, the tenth Duke of *Milan*, to whom all *Italy* had so long truckled under, was seen to die a wretched Prisoner at *Loches*, but not till he had lived ten Years in Captivity, which was the worst Part of his Fortune. The fairest of all Queens, Widow to the greatest King in *Europe*, did she not come to die by the Hand of an Executioner? Unworthy and barbarous Cruelty! and a thousand more Examples there are of the same Kind; for, it seems, that as Storms and Tempests have a Malice to the proud and overtowering Heights of our lofty Buildings, there are also Spirits above that are envious of the Grandeurs here below.

Mary, Queen
of Scots.

*Usque adeo res humanas vis abdita quædam
Obterit, & pulchros Fasces, sævasque secures
Proculcare, hac ludibro sibi habere videtur*.*

By which it does appear, a Power unseen
Rome's awful Fasces, and her Axes keen
Spurns under Foot, and plainly does despise,
Of human Power the vain Formalities.

And it should seem also that Fortune sometimes lyes in wait to surprize the last Hour of our Lives, to shew the Power she has in a Moment to overthrow what she was so

* *Lucret. l. 5.*

many Years in building, making us cry out with *Laberius*,
Nimirum hac die una plus vixi mihi quam vivendum fuit *,
I have liv'd longer by this one Day than I ought to have
done. And in this Sense, this good Advice of *Solon* may
reasonably be taken; but he being a Philosopher, with
which Sort of Men the Favours and Disgraces of Fortune
stand for nothing, either to the making a Man happy or
unhappy, and with whom Grandeurs and Powers, Acci-
dents of Quality, are upon the Matter indifferent, I am
apt to think he had some farther Aim, and that his Mean-
ing was, that the very Felicity of Life itself, which
depends upon the Tranquillity and Contentment of a well-
descended Spirit, and the Resolution and Assurance of a
well-ordered Soul, ought never to be attributed to any
Man, 'till he has first been seen to play the last, and doubt-
less the hardest Act of his Part, because there may be Dis-
guise and Dissimulation in all the rest, where these fine
Philosophical Discourses are only put on; and where Acci-
dents do not touch us to the Quick, they give us Leisure to
maintain the same sober Gravity; but in this last Scene of
Death, there is no more counterfeiting, we must speak
plain, and must discover what there is of pure and clean
in the Bottom.

*Nam vera voces tum demum pectore ab imo
Ejiciuntur, & eripitur persona, manet res †.*

Then that at last Truth issues from the Heart,
The Vizard's gone, we act our own true Part.

Wherefore at this last all the other Actions of our Life ought
to be try'd and sifted. 'Tis the Master-day, 'tis the Day
that is Judge of all the rest, 'Tis the Day (says one of the An-
cients) *that ought to judge of all my foregoing Years.* To
Death do I refer the Essay of the Fruit of all my Studies.
We shall then see whether my Discourses came only from
my Mouth, or from my Heart. I have seen many by their
Death give a good or an ill Repute to their whole Life.
Scipio, the Father-in-law of *Pompey* the Great, in dying
well wip'd away the ill Opinion, that 'till then every
one had conceived of him. *Epaminondas* being asked

* *Macrob. l. 2. c. 2.*

† *Lucret. l. 3.*

which of the three he had in greatest Esteem, *Chabrias*, *Iphicrates*, or himself; *You must first see us die* (said he) *before that Question can be resolved*: And in Truth, he would infinitely wrong that great Man, who would weigh him without the Honour and Grandeur of his End. God Almighty has ordered all Things as it has best pleased him: But I have in my Time seen three of the most execrable Persons that ever I knew, in all Manner of abominable Living, and the most infamous to boot, who all died a very regular Death, and in all Circumstances composed even to Perfection. There are brave and fortunate Deaths. I have seen Death cut the Thread of the Progress of a prodigious Advancement, and in the Height and Flower of it's Encrease of a certain Person, with so glorious an End, that, in my Opinion, his ambitious and generous Designs had nothing in them so high and great as their Interruption; and he arrived, without completing his Course, at the Place to which his Ambition pretended with greater Glory, than he could himself either hope or desire, and anticipated by his Fall the Name and Power to which he aspired, by perfecting his Career. In the Judgment I make of another Man's Life, I always observe how he carried himself at his Death; and the principal Concern I have for my own, is, that I may die handsomly, that is, patiently, and without Noise.



C H A P. XIX.

That to study Philosophy is to learn to die.

Cicero says, *That to study Philosophy is nothing but to prepare a Man's self to die.* The Reason of which is, because Study and Contemplation do in some sort withdraw from us, and deprive us of our Souls, and employ it separately from the Body, which is a kind of learning to die, and a Resemblance of Death, or else because all the Wisdom and Reasoning in the World does in the End conclude in this Point, to teach us not to fear to die. And to say the Truth, either our Reason does grossly abuse us, or it ought to have no other Aim but our Contentment only, nor to endeavour