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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. 53. Of a Saying of Cæsar.

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Half-penny a Day, when employed as publick Minister about the publick Affairs, and being at that time the greatest Man of *Rome*.



C H A P. LIII.

Of a Saying of Cæsar.

IF we would sometimes bestow a little Consideration upon ourselves, and employ that Time in examining our own Abilities which we spend in prying into other Men's Actions, and discovering Things without us, we should soon perceive of how infirm and decaying Materials this Fabrick of ours is composed. Is it not a singular Testimony of Imperfection, that we cannot establish our Satisfaction in any one Thing, and that even our own Fancy and Desire should deprive us of the Power to choose what is most proper and useful for us? A very good Proof of this, is the great Dispute that has ever been amongst the Philosophers, of finding out a Man's principal and sovereign Good; that Dispute continues yet, and will eternally continue, without Solution or Agreement.

—*Dum abest quod avemus, id exuperare videtur,
Cætera, post aliud cum contigit illud avemus,
Et sitis æqua tenet* *.

The absent we covet, best doth seem,
The next that comes captivates our Esteem
At the same rate.

Whatever that is that falls into our Knowledge and Possession, we find it satisfies not, and still pant after Things to come, and unknown; and these because the present

* *Lucret. l. 3.*

do not satiate and glut us; not that, in my Judgment, they have not in them wherewith to do it, but because we seize them with an unruly and immoderate Haste.

*Nam cum vidit hic ad victum quæ flagitat usus,
Et per quæ possent vitam consistere tutam,
Omnia jam firme mortalibus esse parata:
Divitiis homines, & honore & laude potentis
Affluere, atque bona natorum excellere fama,
Nec minus esse domi cuiquam tamen anxia corda,
Atque animum infestis cogi servire querelis:
Intellexit ibi vitium vas facere ipsum,
Omniaque illius vitio corrumpitur intus
Quæ collata foris, & commoda quæque venirent*.*

For when he saw all Things that had regard
To Life's Subsistence for Mankind prepar'd,
That Men in Wealth and Honours did abound,
Had hopeful Issue set their Tables round;
And yet had Hearts as anxious as before,
Murmuring amidst their Happiness and Store:
He then perceiv'd the Vessel was to blame,
And gave a Smatch to all that in it came,
'That neither from without him was convey'd,
To have him happy and contented made.

Our Appetite is irresolute and fickle, it can neither keep nor enjoy any thing graceful, and as it should: And Man concluding it to be the Fault of the Things he is possessed of, fills himself with, and feeds himself upon the Idea of Things he neither knows nor understands, to which he devotes his Hopes and his Desires, paying them all Reverence and Honour, according to the Saying of Cæsar, *Communi fit vitio naturæ, ut invisis latitantibus atque incognitis rebus magis confidamus, vehementiusque exterreamur.* 'Tis the common Vice of Nature, that we repose most Confidence, and receive the greatest Apprehensions, from Things unseen, concealed, and unknown.

* *Lucret.*