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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. 35. Of three good Women.

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C H A P. XXXV.

Of Three good Women.

GOOD Women are not by Dozens, as every one knows, and especially in the *Duties of Marriage*; for that is a Bargain full of so many nice Circumstances, that 'tis hard a Woman's Will should long endure such a Restraint. Men, tho' their Condition be something better under that Tye, have yet enough to do. The true Touch and Test of a happy Marriage respects the Time of their Cohabitation only, if it has been constantly, mild, loyal, commodious. In our Age Women commonly reserve the Publication of their good Offices, and their vehement Affection towards their Husbands until they have lost them, or at least, till then defer the Testimonies of their good Will. A too slow Testimony, and that comes too late; by which they rather manifest *that they never lov'd them till dead*. Their Life is nothing but Trouble, their Death full of Love and Courtesy. As Fathers conceal their Affections from their Children, Women likewise conceal theirs from their Husbands to maintain a modest Respect. This Mystery is not for my Palate; 'tis to much Purpose that they scratch themselves and tear their Hair. I whisper in a Waiting-woman or a Secretary's Ear, *How were they? How did they live together?* I always have that good Saying in my Head, *jactantius mærent, quæ minus dolent*. *They make the most ado who are least concern'd*. Their whimpering is offensive to the Living, and vain to the Dead: We should willingly give them leave to laugh after we are dead, provided they will smile upon us whilst we are alive. Is it not to make a Man revive in spite, that she who spit in my Face whilst I was, shall come to kiss my Feet when I am no more? If there be any Honour in lamenting a Husband, it only appertains to those who smil'd upon them whilst they had them, let those who wept during their Lives laugh at their Deaths, as well outwardly as within. Moreover, never regard

regard those blubber'd Eyes, and that pitiful Voice; but consider her Deportments, her Complexion, and the Plumpness of her Cheeks under all those formal Veils; 'tis there the Discovery is to be made. There are few who do not mend upon't, and Health is a Quality that cannot lye: That starch'd and ceremonious Countenance looks not so much back as forward. and is rather intended to get a New one, than to lament the Old. When I was a Boy, a very beautiful and virtuous Lady, who is yet living, and the Widow of a Prince, had I know not what more Ornament in her Dress than our Laws of Widow-hood will well allow, which being reproach'd withal, as a great Indecency, she made Answer, *That it was because she was resolv'd to have no more Friendships, and would never marry again.*

I have here, not at all dissenting from our Customs, made choice of three Women, who have also express'd the Utmost of their Goodness and Affections about their Husbands Deaths; yet are they Examples of another kind than are now in use, and so severe, as will hardly be drawn into Imitation.

The younger Pliny had, near a House of his in Italy, a Neighbour who was exceedingly tormented with certain Ulcers in his private Parts. His Wife seeing him so long to languish, intreated that he would give her leave to see, and at leisure to consider of the Condition of his Disease, and that she would freely tell him what she thought: This Permission being obtain'd, and she having curiously examin'd the Business, found it impossible he could ever be cur'd, and that all he was to hope for or expect, was a great while to linger out a painful and miserable Life, and therefore, as the most sure and sovereign Remedy, resolutely advis'd him to kill himself. But finding him a little tender and backward in so rude an Attempt: *Do not think my Friend,* said she, *that the Torments I see thee endure are not as sensible to me as thyself, and that to deliver myself from them, I will not myself make use of the same Remedy I have prescrib'd to thee. I will accompany thee in the Cure as I have done in the Disease; fear nothing, but believe that we shall have Pleasure in this Passage, that is, to free us from so many Miseries, and we will go happily together.* Which having said, and rous'd up her Husband's Courage, she

she resolv'd that they should throw themselves headlong into the Sea out of a Window that lean'd over it; and that she might maintain to the last the loyal and vehement Affection wherewith she had embrac'd him during his Life, she would yet have him die in her Arms; but for fear they should fail, and lest they should leave their hold in the Fall, she tyed herself fast to him by the Wasse, and so gave up her own Life to procure her Husband's Repose. This was a mean Woman, and even amongst that condition of People, 'tis no very new thing to see some rare Examples of Virtue.

— extrema per illos

Justitia excedens terris vestigia fecit *.

When from the Earth Justice herself bereft,
She her last Steps upon such People left.

The other two were noble and rich, where Examples of Virtue are rarely lodg'd. *Arria*, the Wife of *Cecinna Pætus*, a Consular Person, was the Mother of another *Arria*, the Wife of *Thracea Pætus*, he whose Virtue was so renowned in the Time of *Nero*, and by means of this Son in Law, the Grand-mother of *Fannia*: For the Resemblance of the Names of these Men and Women, and their Fortunes, had made many mistake. This first *Arria*, her Husband *Cecinna Pætus*, having been made Prisoner by some of the Emperor *Claudius's* People, after *Scribonianus's* Defeat, whose Party he had embrac'd in the War, begg'd of those who were to carry him Prisoner to Rome, that they would take her into their Ship, where she should be of much less charge and trouble to them than a great many Persons they must otherwise have to attend her Husband, and that she alone would undertake to serve him in his Chamber, his Kitchen, and all other Offices. But they refus'd her, wherefore she put herself into a Fisher-boat she hir'd on a sudden, and in that manner from *Sclavonia* followed him: Being come to Rome, *Junia*, the Widow of *Scribonianus*, one Day, for the resemblance of their Fortune, accosting her in the Emperor's Presence; she rudely repuls'd her with these Words, *I*,

* *Virg. Georg. lib. 2.*

said she, *Speak to thee, or give ear to any thing thou say'st! to thee, in whose Lap Scribonianus was Slain, and thou art yet alive!* These Words, with several other Signs, gave her Friends to understand that she would undoubtedly dispatch herself, impatient of supporting her Husband's Fortune. And *Thrasea* her Son in Law, beseeching her not to throw away herself, and saying to her, *What? If I should run the same Fortune that Cecinna has done, would you that your Daughter, my Wife, should do the same? Would I?* reply'd she, *Yes, yes, I would, if she had liv'd as long, and in as good Intelligence with thee as I have done with my Husband.* These Answers made them more careful of her, and to have a more watchful Eye to her Deportments. One Day having said to those that look'd to her; *'Tis to much Purpose that you take all this Pains to prevent me; you may indeed make me die an ill Death, but to keep me from dying is not in your Power;* she suddenly furious started from a Chair wherein she sat, and with all her Force ran her Head against the Wall, by which Blow being laid flat in a Swoon and very much wounded, after they had again with much ado brought her to herself: *I told you,* said she, *that if you refused me some easy way of dying, I should find out another, how painful soever.* The Conclusion of so admirable a Virtue was thus: Her Husband *Pætus*, not having resolution enough of his own to dispatch himself, as he was by the Emperor's Cruelty enjoin'd, one Day amongst others, after having first employ'd all the Reasons and Exhortations which she thought most prevalent to persuade him to it, she snatch'd the Poignard he wore from his Side, and holding it ready in her Hand, for the Conclusion of her Admonitions, *Do thus Pætus,* said she, and in the same Instant giving herself a mortal Stab in the Breast, and then drawing it out of the Wound, presented it to him, ending her Life with this noble, generous, and immortal Saying, *Pæte non dolet. Pætus, it is not painful;* having Strength to pronounce no more but those few never to be forgotten Words,

*Casto suo gladium cum traderet Arria Pæto,
Quem de visceribus traxerat ipso suis:
Si qua fides, vulnus quod feci, non dolet, inquit,
Sed quod tu facies, id mihi Pæte dolet*.*

* *Mart. lib. 1. Epig. 14.*

When

When the Chaste *Arria* gave the reeking Brand,
That had new goar'd her Heart; to *Pætus* Hand,
Pætus, the Wound I've made hurts not, quoth she,
But the Wound thou wilt make, 'tis that hurts me.

The Action was much more noble in itself, and of a braver Sense than the Poet could express it; for she was so far from being deterr'd by the Cruelty of her Husband's Wound and Death, and her own, that she had been the Promotress, and had given the Advice; but having perform'd this high and courageous Enterprize for her Husband's only Convenience, she had even in the last Gasps of her Life no other Concern but for him, and of disposseſſing him of the Fear of dying with her. *Pætus* presently struck himself to the Heart with the same Weapon, asham'd, I believe, to have stood in need of so dear and pretious an Example.

Pompeia Paulina, a young and very noble Roman Lady, had married *Seneca* in his extreme Old Age. *Nero*, his fine Pupil, sent his Guards to him, to denounce the Sentence of Death, which was perform'd after this Manner: When the Roman Emperors of those Times had condemn'd any Man of Quality, they sent to him by their Officers to chuse what Death he would, and to execute it within such or such a Time, which was limited according to the Mettle of their Indignation, to a shorter or a longer Respite, that they might therein have better Leisure to put their Affairs in Order, and sometimes depriving them of the Means of doing it by the Shortness of the Time; and if the Condemn'd seem'd unwilling to submit to the Order, they had People ready at hand to execute it, either by cutting the Veins of the Arms and Legs, or by compelling them by Force to swallow a Draught of Poison. But Persons of Honour would not stay this Necessity, but made use of their own Physicians and Chirurgeons for this Purpose. *Seneca* with a calm and steady Countenance heard the Charge, and presently call'd for Paper to write his Will, which being by the Captain deny'd, he turn'd himself towards his Friends, saying to them, *Since I cannot leave you any other Acknowledgment of the Obligation I have to you, I leave you at least the best Thing I have, namely, the Image of my Life and Manners, which I intreat*
you

you to keep in Memory of me ; that so doing you may acquire the Glory of sincere and real Friends. And therewithal one while appeasing the Sorrow he saw them in with gentle Words, and presently raising his Voice to reprove them ; What, said he, are become of all our brave Philosophical Precepts ? What are become of all the Provisions we have so many Years laid up against the Accidents of Fortune ? Is Nero's Cruelty unknown to us ? What could we expect from him who had murth'ed his Mother and Brother, but that he should put his Governor to Death, who had nourish'd and bred him ? After having spoke these Words in general, he turn'd himself towards his Wife, and embracing her fast in his Arms, as her Heart and Strength failing her, she was ready to sink down with Grief, he begg'd of her, for his Sake, to bear this Accident with a little more Patience, telling her, that now the Hour was come wherein he was to shew, not by Argument and Discourse, but by Effect, the Fruit he had acquired by his Studies ; and that he really embraced his Death, not only without Grief, but moreover with exceeding Joy. Wherefore, my Dearest, said he, do not dishonour it with thy Tears, that it may not seem as if thou lov'st thyself more than my Reputation. Moderate thy Grief, and comfort thyself in the Knowledge thou hast had of me and of my Actions, leading the Remainder of thy Life in the same virtuous Manner thou hast hitherto done. To which Paulina, having a little recover'd her Spirits, and warm'd her Magnanimity with the Heat of a most generous Affection, reply'd : No, Seneca, I am not a Woman to suffer you to go alone in such Necessity : I will not have you to think that the virtuous Examples of your Life have not yet taught me how to die, and when can I ever better, or more decently do it, or more to my own Desire, than with you ? and therefore assure yourself I will go along with you. Seneca then taking this noble and generous Resolution of his Wife exceedingly kind at her Hands, and also willing to free himself from the Fear of leaving her exposed to the Mercy and Cruelty of his Enemies after his Death : I have, Paulina, said he, sufficiently instructed thee in what would serve thee happily to live ; but thou more covet'st, I see, the Honour of dying : In truth I will not grudge it thee ; the Constancy and Resolution in our common End are the same,

same, but the Beauty and Glory of thy Part is much greater. Which being said, the Chirurgeons at the same Time open'd the Veins of both their Arms; but being those of *Seneca* were more shrunk up, as well with Age as Abstinence, made his Blood to flow more slowly, he moreover commanded them to open the Veins of his Thighs; and lest the Torments he endured might intimidate his Wife's Heart, and also to free himself from the Affliction of seeing her in so sad a Condition, after having taken a very affectionate Leave of her, *he intreated she would suffer them to carry her into her Chamber*; which they accordingly did: But all these Incisions being not yet enough to make him die, he commanded *Statius Anneus*, his Physician, to give him a Draught of Poison, which had not much better Effect; for by reason of the Weakness and Coldness of his Limbs, it could not arrive to his Heart. Wherefore they were forc'd to superadd a very hot Bath, and then feeling his End approach, whilst he had Breath he continued excellent Discourses upon the Subject of his present Condition, which the Secretaries writ down so long as they could hear his Voice, and his last Words were long after in high Honour and Esteem amongst Men; and it was a great Loss to us that they were not reserv'd down to our Times: Then feeling the last Pangs of Death, with the bloody Water of the Bath he bath'd his Head, saying, *This Water I dedicate to Jupiter the Deliverer.* *Nero*, being presently advertis'd of all this, fearing lest the Death of *Paulina*, who was one of the best descended Ladies of *Rome*, and against whom he had no particular Unkindness, should turn to his Reproach, he sent back Orders in all Haste to bind up her Wounds, which her Attendants without his Knowledge had done before; she being already half dead, and without all Manner of Sense. Thus, tho' she liv'd, contrary to her own Design, it was very honourably, and according to her own Virtue, her pale Complexion ever after manifesting how much Life was run from her Veins.

These are my three very true Stories, which I find as diverting and as tragick as any of those we make of our own Heads, wherewith to entertain the common People; and I wonder they who are addicted to such Relations,
do

do not rather cull out ten thousand very fine Stories, which are to be found in very good Authors, that would save them the Trouble of Invention, and be more useful and diverting: And who would make a Collection of them, would need to add nothing of his own, but the Connection only, as it were the Soder of another Metal; and might by this means Embody a great many true Events of all Sorts, disposing and diversifying of them according as the Beauty of the Work should require, after the same Manner almost as *Ovid* has made up his *Metamorphosis* of the infinite Number of various Fables.

In this last Couple this is moreover worthy of Consideration, that *Paulina* voluntarily offer'd to lose her Life for the Love of her Husband, and that her Husband had formerly also forbore dying for the Love of her. There is no just Counterpoise in this Exchange as to us; but according to his Stoical Humour I presume he thought he had done as much for her, in prolonging his Life upon her Account, as if he had dy'd for her. In one of his Letters to *Lucilius*, after he has given him to understand, that being seiz'd with an *Ague* at *Rome*, he presently took Coach to go to a House he had in the Country, contrary to his Wife's Opinion, who would by all means persuade him to stay: And that he told her, that the *Ague* he was seiz'd with was not a Fever of the Body, but the Place; it follows thus; *She let me go*, says he, *with giving me a strict Charge of my Health.* Now I, who know that her Life is involv'd in mine, begin to make much of myself, that I may preserve her: and I lose the Privilege my Age has given me of being more constant and resolute in many things, when I call to mind, that in this old Fellow there is a young Lady who is interested in his Health. And since I cannot persuade her to love me more courageously, she makes me more solicitously to love myself: For we must allow something to honest Affections, and sometimes, tho' Occasions importune us to the Contrary, we must call back Life, even tho' it be with Torment; we must hold the Soul fast in our Teeth, since the Rule of Living amongst good Men is not so long as they please, but as long as they ought: He that loves not his Wife and his Friend so well as to prolong his Life for them, but will obstinately die, is too delicate and too effeminate: The Soul must

must impose this upon itself, when the Utility of our Friend does so require: We must sometimes lend ourselves to our Friends, and when we would die for ourselves, must break that Resolution for them. 'Tis a Testimony of Grandeur and Courage to return to Life for the Consideration of another, as many excellent Persons have done; and 'tis a Mark of singular good Nature to preserve old Age (of which, the greatest Convenience is the Indifferency of its Duration, and a more Stout and Disdainful Use of Life) when a Man perceives that this Office is Pleasing, Agreeable, and Useful to some Person by whom we are very much belov'd. And a Man reaps by it a very pleasing Reward; for what can be more Delightful than to be so dear to his Wife, as upon her Account he shall become dear to himself. Thus has my Paulina loaded me not only with her Fears, but my own; it has not been sufficient to consider how resolutely I could die, but I have also consider'd how irresolutely she would bear my Death. I am enforc'd to live, and sometimes to live is Magnanimity. These are his own Words, as excellent as they every where use to be.



C H A P. XXXVI.

Of the most Excellent Men.

Should I be ask'd my Opinion and Choice of all the Men who have come to my Knowledge, I should make answer, *That methinks I find three more Excellent than all the rest.* One of them *Homer*; not that *Aristotle* and *Varro*, for Example, were not perhaps as learned as he; nor that possibly *Virgil* was not equal to him in his own Art; which I leave to be determined by such as know them both, and are best able to judge. I, who for my part, understand but one of them, can only say this, according to my poor Talent, *that I do not believe the Muses themselves did ever go beyond the Roman.*

*Tale facit carmen docta testudine, quale
Cynthius impositis temperat articulus*.*

* *Propert. l. 2. Eleg. ult.*