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The Works Of The Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.

In Four Volumes

Addison, Joseph

London, 1721

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Defendit numerus, junctæque umbone phalanges. Juv.

THERE is something very sublime, though very fanciful, in *Plato's* description of the supreme Being, That *Truth is his body, and light his shadow.* According to this definition, there is nothing so contradictory to his nature, as error and falshood. The Platonists have so just a notion of the Almighty's aversion to every thing which is false and erroneous, that they looked upon *Truth* as no less necessary than *Virtue*, to qualify a human Soul for the enjoyment of a separate state. For this reason, as they recommended moral duties to qualify and season the will for a future life, so they prescribed several contemplations and sciences to rectify the understanding. Thus *Plato* has called mathematical demonstrations the Cathartics or purgatives of the Soul, as being the most proper means to cleanse it from error, and to give it a relish of truth; which is the natural food and nourishment of the understanding, as virtue is the perfection and happiness of the will.

There are many Authors who have shewn wherein the malignity of a *Lye* consists, and set forth in proper colours, the heinousness of the offence. I shall here consider one particular kind of this crime, which has not been so much spoken to; I mean that abominable practice of *Party-lying*. This vice is so very predominant among us at present, that a man is thought of no principles, who does not propagate a certain system of Lyes. The coffee-houses are supported by them, the press is choaked with them, eminent Authors live upon them. Our bottle-conversation is so infected with them, that a Party-lye is grown as fashionable an entertainment, as a lively catch or a merry story: the truth of it is, half the great talkers in the nation would be struck dumb, were this fountain of discourse dried up. There is however one advantage resulting from this detestable practice; the very appearances of truth are so little regarded, that lyes are at present discharged in the air, and begin to hurt no body. When we hear a party-

story from a stranger, we consider whether he is a Whig or Tory that relates it, and immediately conclude they are words of course, in which the honest Gentleman designs to recommend his zeal, without any concern for his veracity. A man is looked upon as bereft of common sense, that gives credit to the relations of Party-writers; nay his own friends shake their heads at him, and consider him in no other light than as an officious tool or a well-meaning ideot. When it was formerly the fashion to husband a Lye, and trump it up in some extraordinary emergency, it generally did execution, and was not a little serviceable to the faction that made use of it; but at present every man is upon his guard, the artifice has been too often repeated to take effect.

I have frequently wondered to see men of probity, who would scorn to utter a falshood for their own particular advantage, give so readily into a Lye when it is become the voice of their faction, notwithstanding they are thoroughly sensible of it as such. How is it possible for those who are men of honour in their persons, thus to become notorious lyers in their party? If we look into the bottom of this matter, we may find, I think, three reasons for it, and at the same time discover the insufficiency of these reasons to justify so criminal a practice.

In the first place, men are apt to think that the guilt of a Lye, and consequently the punishment, may be very much diminished, if not wholly worn out, by the multitudes of those who partake in it. Though the weight of a falshood would be too heavy for *one* to bear, it grows light in their imaginations, when it is shared among *many*. But in this case a man very much deceives himself; guilt, when it spreads through numbers, is not so properly divided as multiplied: every one is criminal in proportion to the offence which he commits, not to the number of those who are his companions in it. Both the crime and the penalty lie as heavy upon every individual of an offending multitude, as they would upon any single person, had none shared with him in the offence. In a word, the division of guilt is like that of matter; though it may be separated into infinite portions, every portion shall have the whole essence of matter in it, and consist of as many parts as the whole did before it was divided.

But in the second place, though multitudes, who join in a Lye, cannot exempt themselves from the guilt, they may from the shame of it. The scandal of a Lye is in a manner lost and annihilated, when diffused among several thousands; as a drop of the blackest tincture wears away and vanishes, when mixed and confused in a considerable body of water; the blot is still in it, but is not able to discover it self. This is certainly a very

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ry great motive to several party-offenders, who avoid crimes, not as they are prejudicial to their virtue, but to their reputation. It is enough to shew the weakness of this reason, which palliates guilt without removing it, that every man who is influenced by it declares himself in effect an infamous hypocrite, prefers the appearance of virtue to its reality, and is determined in his conduct neither by the dictates of his own conscience, the suggestions of true honour, nor the principles of religion.

The third and last great motive for mens joining in a popular falshood, or, as I have hitherto called it, a Party-lye, notwithstanding they are convinced of it as such, is the doing good to a cause which every party may be supposed to look upon as the most meritorious. The unsoundness of this principle has been so often exposed, and is so universally acknowledged, that a man must be an utter stranger to the principles, either of natural religion or christianity, who suffers himself to be guided by it. If a man might promote the supposed good of his country by the blackest calumnies and falshoods, our nation abounds more in patriots than any other of the christian world. When *Pompey* was desired not to set sail in a tempest that would hazard his life, *It is necessary for me, says he, to sail, but it is not necessary for me to live:* every man should say to himself, with the same spirit, *It is my duty to speak truth, though it is not my duty to be in an office.* One of the Fathers has carried this point so high, as to declare, *He would not tell a lye, though he were sure to gain Heaven by it.* However extravagant such a protestation may appear, every one will own, that a man may say very reasonably, *He would not tell a lye, if he were sure to gain Hell by it;* or, if you have a mind to soften the expression, that he would not tell a lye to gain any temporal reward by it, when he should run the hazard of losing much more than it was possible for him to gain.



Thursday.