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The Works Of The Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.

In Four Volumes

Addison, Joseph

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N^o 538. *Monday, November 17.*

----- *Ultra*
Finem tendere opus.

Hor.

SURPRIZE is so much the life of stories, that every one aims at it, who endeavours to please by telling them. Smooth delivery, an elegant choice of words, and a sweet arrangement, are all beautifying *Graces*; but not the particulars in this point of conversation which either long command the attention, or strike with the violence of a sudden passion, or occasion the burst of laughter which accompanies humour. I have sometimes fancied that the mind is in this case like a traveller who sees a fine seat in haste; he acknowledges the delightfulness of a walk set with regularity, but would be uneasy if he were obliged to pace it over, when the first view had let him into all its beauties from one end to the other.

However, a knowledge of the success which stories will have when they are attended with a turn of surprize, as it has happily made the characters of some, so has it also been the ruin of the characters of others. There is a set of men who outrage truth, instead of affecting us with a manner in telling it; who over-leap the line of probability, that they may be seen to move out of the common road; and endeavour only to make their hearers stare, by imposing upon them with a kind of nonsense against the philosophy of nature, or such a heap of wonders told upon their own knowledge, as it is not likely one man should ever have met with.

I have been led to this observation by a company into which I fell accidentally. The subject of *Antipathies* was a proper field wherein such false surprizers might expatiate, and there were those present who appeared very fond to shew it in its full extent of traditional history. Some of them, in a learned manner, offered to our consideration the miraculous powers which the effluvioms of cheese have over bodies whose pores are disposed to receive them in a noxious manner: others gave an account
of

of such who could indeed bear the sight of cheefe, but not the taste; for which they brought a reason from the milk of their nurses. Others again discourf'd, without endeavouring at reasons, concerning an unconquerable averfion which fome ftomachs have againft a joint of meat when it is whole, and the eager inclination they have for it, when, by its being cut up, the fhape which had affected them is altered. From hence they paffed to Eels, then to Parfnips, and fo from one averfion to another, till we had worked up our felves to fuch a pitch of complaifance, that when the dinner was to come in, we enquired the name of every difh, and hoped it would be no offence to any in the company, before it was admitted. When we had fat down, this civility amongst us turned the difcourfe from eatables to other forts of averfions; and the eternal cat, which plagues every converfation of this nature, began then to engrofs the fubject. One had fweated at the fight of it; another had fmelled it out as it lay concealed in a very diftant cupboard; and he who crowned the whole fet of thefe ftories, reckoned up the number of times in which it had occafioned him to fwoon away. At laft, fays he, that you may all be fatisfied of my invincible averfion to a cat, I fhall give an unanfwerable inftance: as I was going through a ftreet of *London*, where I never had been till then, I felt a general damp and a faintnefs all over me, which I could not tell how to account for, till I chanced to caft my eyes upwards, and found that I was paffing under a fign-poft on which the picture of a cat was hung.

The extravagance of this turn in the way of surprize, gave a ftop to the talk we had been carrying on: fome were filent becaufe they doubted, and others becaufe they were conquered in their own way; fo that the Gentleman had opportunity to prefs the belief of it upon us, and let us fee that he was rather expofing himfelf than ridiculing others.

I muft freely own that I did not all this while difbelieve every thing that was faid; but yet I thought fome in the company had been endeavouring who fhould pitch the bar fartheft; that it had for fome time been a meafuring caft, and at laft my friend of the cat and fign-poft had thrown beyond them all.

I then confidered the manner in which this ftory had been received, and the poffibility that it might have paffed for a jeft upon others, if he had not laboured againft himfelf. From hence, thought I, there are two ways which the well-bred world generally take to correct fuch a practice, when they do not think fit to contradict it flatly.

The

The first of these is a general silence, which I would not advise any one to interpret in his own behalf. It is often the effect of prudence in avoiding a quarrel, when they see another drive so fast, that there is no stopping him without being run against; and but very seldom the effect of weakness in believing suddenly. The generality of mankind are not so grossly ignorant, as some over-bearing spirits would persuade themselves; and if the authority of a character or a caution against danger make us suppress our opinion, yet neither of these are of force enough to suppress our thoughts of them. If a man who has endeavoured to amuse his company with improbabilities could but look into their minds, he would find that they imagine he lightly esteems of their sense when he thinks to impose upon them, and that he is less esteemed by them for his attempt in doing so. His endeavour to glory at their expence becomes a ground of quarrel, and the scorn and indifference with which they entertain it begins the immediate punishment: And indeed (if we should even go no further) silence, or a negligent indifference has a deeper way of wounding than opposition; because opposition proceeds from an anger that has a sort of generous sentiment for the adversary mingling along with it, while it shews that there is some esteem in your mind for him; in short, that you think him worth while to contest with: but silence, or a negligent indifference, proceeds from anger, mixed with a scorn that shews another he is thought by you too contemptible to be regarded.

The other method which the world has taken for correcting this practice of false surprize, is to over-shoot such talkers in their own bow, or to raise the story with further degrees of impossibility, and set up for a voucher to them in such a manner as must let them see they stand detected. Thus I have heard a discourse was once managed upon the effects of fear. One of the company had given an account how it had turned his friend's hair grey in a night, while the terrors of a shipwreck encompassed him. Another taking the hint from hence, began, upon his own knowledge, to enlarge his instances of the like nature to such a number, that it was not probable he could ever have met with them; and as he still grounded these upon different causes, for the sake of variety, it might seem at last, from his share of the conversation, almost impossible that any one who can feel the passion of fear should all his life escape so common an effect of it. By this time some of the company grew negligent, or desirous to contradict him: but one rebuked the rest with an appearance of severity, and with the known old story in his head, assured them they

need not scruple to believe that the fear of any thing can make a man's hair grey, since he knew one whose perriwig had suffered so by it: thus he stopped the talk, and made them easy. Thus is the same method taken to bring us to shame, which we fondly take to increase our character. It is indeed a kind of mimickry, by which another puts on our air of conversation to show us to our selves: he seems to look ridiculous before you, that you may remember how near a resemblance you bear to him, or that you may know he will not lie under the imputation of believing you. Then it is that you are struck dumb immediately with a conscientious shame for what you have been saying: then it is that you are inwardly grieved at the sentiments which you cannot but perceive others entertain concerning you. In short, you are against your self; the laugh of the company runs against you; the censuring world is obliged to you for that triumph which you have allowed them at your own expence; and truth, which you have injured, has a near way of being revenged on you, when by the bare repetition of your story you become a frequent diversion for the publick.

Mr. SPECTATOR,

“ THE other day, walking in *Pancras* Church-yard, I thought of
 “ your paper wherein you mention Epitaphs, and am of opinion
 “ this has a thought in it worth being communicated to your Readers.

*Here innocence and beauty lies, whose breath
 Was snatch'd by early, not untimely death.
 Hence did she go, just as she did begin
 Sorrow to know, before she knew to sin.
 Death, that does sin and sorrow thus prevent,
 Is the next blessing to a life well spent.*

I am, SIR, your servant.



Friday,