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In Four Volumes

Addison, Joseph

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understanding persons. Ease and plenty are therefore the great cherishers of knowledge; and as most of the despotic governments of the world have neither of them, they are naturally over-run with ignorance and barbarity. In *Europe*, indeed, notwithstanding several of its Princes are absolute, there are men famous for knowledge and learning, but the reason is because the subjects are many of them rich and wealthy; the Prince not thinking fit to exert himself in his full tyranny like the Princes of the Eastern nations, lest his subjects should be invited to new-mould their constitution, having so many prospects of liberty within their view. But in all despotic governments, though a particular Prince may favour arts and letters, there is a natural degeneracy of mankind, as you may observe from *Augustus's* reign, how the *Romans* lost themselves by degrees till they fell to an equality with the most barbarous nations that surrounded them. Look upon *Greece* under its free States, and you would think its inhabitants lived in different climates, and under different heavens, from those at present; so different are the Genius's which are formed under *Turkish* slavery, and *Grecian* liberty.

Besides poverty and want, there are other reasons that debase the minds of men, who live under slavery, though I look on this as the principal. This natural tendency of despotic power to ignorance and barbarity, though not insisted upon by others, is, I think, an unanswerable argument against that form of government, as it shews how repugnant it is to the good of mankind and the perfection of human nature, which ought to be the great ends of all civil institutions.

N^o 289. Thursday, January 31.

Vite summa brevis spem nos vetat inchoare longam. Hor.

UPON taking my seat in a Coffee-house I often draw the eyes of the whole room upon me, when in the hottest seasons of News, and at a time that perhaps the *Dutch* mail is just come in, they hear me ask the Coffee-man for his last week's bill of mortality: I find that I have been sometimes taken on this occasion for a Parish Sexton, some-

sometimes for an Undertaker, and sometimes for a Doctor of physic. In this, however, I am guided by the spirit of a Philosopher, as I take occasion from hence to reflect upon the regular encrease and diminution of mankind, and consider the several various ways through which we pass from life to eternity. I am very well pleased with these weekly admonitions, that bring into my mind such thoughts as ought to be the daily entertainment of every reasonable creature; and can consider, with pleasure to my self, by which of those deliverances, or, as we commonly call them, distempers, I may possibly make my escape out of this world of sorrows, into that condition of existence, wherein I hope to be happier than it is possible for me at present to conceive.

But this is not all the use I make of the above-mentioned weekly paper. A Bill of Mortality is in my opinion an unanswerable argument for a Providence; how can we, without supposing our selves under the constant care of a Supreme Being, give any possible account for that nice proportion which we find in every great city, between the deaths and births of its inhabitants, and between the number of males, and that of females, who are brought into the world? what else could adjust in so exact a manner the recruits of every nation to its losses, and divide these new supplies of people into such equal bodies of both sexes? Chance could never hold the ballance with so steady a hand. Were we not counted out by an intelligent supervisor, we should sometimes be over-charged with multitudes, and at others waste away into a desert: we should be sometimes a *populus virorum*, as *Florus* elegantly expresses it, a *generation of males*, and at others a species of women. We may extend this consideration to every species of living creatures, and consider the whole animal world as an huge army made up of an innumerable *Corps*, if I may use that term, whose quota's have been kept entire near five thousand years, in so wonderful a manner, that there is not probably a single species lost during this long tract of time. Could we have general Bills of Mortality of every kind of animal, or particular ones of every species in each continent and island, I could almost say in every wood, marsh or mountain, what astonishing instances would they be of that Providence which watches over all its works?

I have heard of a great man in the *Romish* Church, who upon reading those words in the fifth chapter of *Genesis*, *And all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years, and he died; and all the days of Seth were nine hundred and twelve years, and he died; and all the days of Methusalah were nine hundred and sixty nine years, and he died;*
immediately

immediately shut himself up in a Convent, and retired from the world, as not thinking any thing in this life worth pursuing, which had not regard to another.

The truth of it is, there is nothing in history which is so improving to the Reader, as those accounts which we meet with of the deaths of eminent persons, and of their behaviour in that dreadful season. I may also add, that there are no parts in history which affect and please the Reader in so sensible a manner. The reason I take to be this, because there is no other single circumstance in the story of any person, which can possibly be the case of every one who reads it. A Battle or a Triumph are conjunctures in which not one man in a million is likely to be engaged; but when we see a person at the point of death, we cannot forbear being attentive to every thing he says or does, because we are sure, that some time or other we shall our selves be in the same melancholy circumstances. The General, the Statesman, or the Philosopher, are perhaps characters which we may never act in; but the dying man is one whom, sooner or later, we shall certainly resemble.

It is perhaps, for the same kind of reason that few books, written in *English*, have been so much perused as Doctor *Sherlock's* Discourse upon Death; though at the same time I must own, that he who has not perused this excellent Piece, has not perhaps read one of the strongest persuasives to a religious life that ever was written in any language.

The consideration, with which I shall close this Essay upon Death, is one of the most ancient and most beaten morals that has been recommended to mankind. But its being so very common, and so universally received, though it takes away from it the grace of novelty, adds very much to the weight of it, as it shews that it falls in with the general sense of mankind. In short, I would have every one consider, that he is in this life nothing more than a Passenger, and that he is not to set up his rest here, but keep an attentive eye upon that state of Being to which he approaches every moment, and which will be for ever fixed and permanent. This single consideration would be sufficient to extinguish the bitterness of Hatred, the thirst of Avarice, and the cruelty of Ambition.

I am very much pleased with the passage of *Antiphanes*, a very ancient Poet, who lived near an hundred years before *Socrates*, which represents the life of man under this view, as I have here translated it word for word. *Be not grieved, says he, above measure for thy deceased friends. They are not dead, but have only finished that journey which it is necessary for every one of us to take: We our selves must go to that great*
place

place of reception in which they are all of them assembled, and in this general rendezvous of mankind, live together in another state of Being.

I think I have, in a former paper, taken notice of those beautiful Metaphors in Scripture, where life is termed a Pilgrimage, and those who pass through it are called Strangers and Sojourners upon earth. I shall conclude this with a story, which I have somewhere read in the Travels of Sir *John Chardin*; that Gentleman, after having told us, that the Inns which receive the Caravans in *Persia*, and the eastern countries, are called by the name of *Caravansaries*, gives us a relation to the following purpose.

A *Dervise*, travelling through *Tartary*, being arrived at the town of *Balk*, went into the King's palace by a mistake, as thinking it to be a public Inn or Caravansary. Having looked about him for some time he entred into a long gallery, where he laid down his wallet, and spread his carpet, in order to repose himself upon it after the manner of the eastern nations. He had not been long in this posture before he was discovered by some of the guards, who asked him what was his business in that place? The *Dervise* told them he intended to take up his night's lodging in that Caravansary. The guards let him know, in a very angry manner, that the house he was in, was not a Caravansary, but the King's palace. It happened that the King himself passed through the gallery during this debate, and smiling at the mistake of the *Dervise*, asked him how he could possibly be so dull as not to distinguish a Palace from a Caravansary? Sir, says the *Dervise*, give me leave to ask your Majesty a question or two. Who were the persons that lodged in this house when it was first built? the King replied, *His Ancestors*. And who, says the *Dervise*, was the last person that lodged here? the King replied, *His Father*. And who is it, says the *Dervise*, that lodges here at present? the King told him *that it was he himself*. And who, says the *Dervise*, will be here after you? the King answered, *The young Prince his son*. "Ah Sir, said the *Dervise*, a house that changes its inhabitants so often, and receives "such a perpetual succession of guests, is not a Palace but a *Caravansary*."

