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The Works Of The Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.

In Four Volumes

Addison, Joseph

London, 1721

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Ægritudinem laudare, unam rem maximè detestabilem, quorum est tandem Philosophorum? Cic.

ABOUT an age ago it was the fashion in *England*, for every one that would be thought religious, to throw as much sanctity as possible into his face, and in particular to abstain from all appearances of mirth and pleasantry, which were looked upon as the marks of a carnal mind. The Saint was of a sorrowful countenance, and generally eaten up with spleen and melancholy. A Gentleman, who was lately a great ornament to the learned world, has diverted me more than once with an account of the reception which he met with from a very famous independent Minister, who was head of a college in those times. This Gentleman was then a young adventurer in the republick of letters, and just fitted out for the University with a good cargo of *Latin* and *Greek*. His friends were resolved that he should try his fortune at an election which was drawing near in the college, of which the Independent minister whom I have before-mentioned was Governor. The youth, according to custom, waited on him in order to be examined. He was received at the door by a servant, who was one of that gloomy generation that were then in fashion. He conducted him, with great silence and seriousness, to a long gallery which was darkned at noon-day, and had only a single candle burning in it. After a short stay in this melancholy apartment, he was led into a chamber hung with black, where he entertained himself for some time by the glimmering of a taper, till at length the head of the college came out to him, from an inner room, with half a dozen night-caps upon his head, and religious horror in his countenance. The young man trembled; but his fears encreased, when, instead of being asked what progress he had made in learning, he was examined how he abounded in grace. His *Latin* and *Greek* stood him in little stead; he was to give an account only of the state of his Soul, whether he was of the number of the Elect; what was the occasion of his conversion;

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upon

upon what day of the month, and hour of the day it happened; how it was carried on, and when compleated. The whole examination was fummed up with one short question, namely, *Whether he was prepared for Death?* The boy, who had been bred up by honest parents, was frighted out of his wits at the solemnity of the proceeding, and especially by the last dreadful interrogatory; so that upon making his escape out of this house of mourning, he could never be brought a second time to the examination, as not being able to go through the terrors of it.

Notwithstanding this general form and outside of religion is pretty well worn out among us, there are many persons, who, by a natural uncheerfulness of heart, mistaken notions of piety, or weakness of understanding, love to indulge this uncomfortable way of life, and give up themselves a prey to grief and melancholy. Superstitious fears and groundless scruples cut them off from the pleasures of conversation, and all those social entertainments, which are not only innocent, but laudable; as if mirth was made for reprobates, and cheerfulness of heart denied those who are the only persons that have a proper title to it.

Sombrius is one of these sons of sorrow. He thinks himself obliged in duty to be sad and disconsolate. He looks on a sudden fit of laughter as a breach of his baptismal vow. An innocent jest startles him like blasphemy. Tell him of one who is advanced to a title of Honour, he lifts up his hands and eyes; describe a publick ceremony, he shakes his head; shew him a gay equipage, he blesses himself. All the little ornaments of life are pomps and vanities. Mirth is wanton, and wit profane. He is scandalized at youth for being lively, and at childhood for being playful. He sits at a christening, or a marriage-feast, as at a funeral; sighs at the conclusion of a merry story, and grows devout when the rest of the company grow pleasant. After all, *Sombrius* is a religious man, and would have behaved himself very properly, had he lived when christianity was under a general persecution.

I would by no means presume to tax such characters with hypocrisy, as is done too frequently; that being a vice which I think none but he, who knows the secrets of mens hearts, should pretend to discover in another, where the proofs of it do not amount to a demonstration. On the contrary, as there are many excellent persons, who are weighed down by this habitual sorrow of heart, they rather deserve our compassion than our reproaches. I think, however, they would do well to consider, whether such a behaviour does not deter men from a religious life, by representing it as an unsocial state, that extinguishes all joy and gladness, darkens the face of nature, and destroys the relish of Being it self. I

I have, in former papers, shewn how great a tendency there is to cheerfulness in religion, and how such a frame of mind is not only the most lovely, but the most commendable in a virtuous person. In short, those who represent religion in so unamiable a light, are like the spies, sent by *Moses* to make a discovery of the land of *Promise*, when by their reports they discouraged the people from entering upon it. Those who shew us the joy, the cheerfulness, the good-humour, that naturally spring up in this happy state, are like the spies bringing along with them the clusters of grapes, and delicious fruits, that might invite their companions into the pleasant country which produced them.

An eminent Pagan writer has made a discourse, to shew that the atheist, who denies a God, does him less dishonour than the man who owns his Being, but at the same time believes him to be cruel, hard to please, and terrible to human nature. For my own part, says he, I would rather it should be said of me, that there was never any such man as *Plutarch*, than that *Plutarch* was ill-natured, capricious, or inhumane.

If we may believe our Logicians, man is distinguished from all other creatures by the faculty of laughter. He has a heart capable of mirth, and naturally disposed to it. It is not the business of virtue to extirpate the affections of the mind, but to regulate them. It may moderate and restrain, but was not designed to banish gladness from the heart of man. Religion contracts the circle of our pleasures, but leaves it wide enough for her votaries to expatiate in. The contemplation of the Divine Being, and the exercise of virtue, are in their own nature so far from excluding all gladness of heart, that they are perpetual sources of it. In a word, the true spirit of religion cheers, as well as composes the Soul; it banishes indeed all levity of behaviour, all vicious and dissolute mirth, but in exchange fills the mind with a perpetual serenity, uninterrupted cheerfulness, and an habitual inclination to please others, as well as to be pleased in it self.



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