AESOP

ÆSOP'S FABLES, EMBELLISHED WITH ONE HUNDRED AND ELEVEN EMBLEMATICAL DEVICES.

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Содержание

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PREFACE, BY S. CROXALL

So much has been already said concerning Æsop and his writings, both by ancient and modern authors, that the subject seems to be quite exhausted. The different conjectures, opinions, traditions, and forgeries, which from time to time we have had given to us of him, would fill a large volume: but they are, for the most part, so inconsistent and absurd, that it would be but a dull amusement for the reader to be led into such a maze of uncertainty: since Herodotus, the most ancient Greek historian, did not flourish till near an hundred years after Æsop.

As for his Life, with which we are entertained in so complete a manner, before most of the editions of his Fables, it was invented by one Maximus Planudes, a Greek Monk; and, if we may judge of him from that composition, just as judicious and learned a person, as the rest of his fraternity are at this day observed to be. Sure there never were so many blunders and childish dreams mixed up together, as are to be met with in the short compass of that piece. For a Monk, he might be very good and wise, but in point of history and chronology, he shows himself to be very ignorant. He brings Æsop to Babylon, in the reign of king Lycerus, a king of his own making; for his name is not to be found in any catalogue, from Nabonassar to Alexander the Great; Nabonadius, most probably, reigning in Babylon about that time. He sends him into Egypt in the days of Nectanebo, who was not in being till two hundred years afterwards; with some other gross mistakes of that kind, which sufficiently show us that this Life was a work of invention, and that the inventor was a bungling poor creature. He never mentions Æsop's being at Athens; though Phædrus speaks of him as one that lived the greatest part of his time there; and it appears that he had a statue erected in that city to his memory, done by the hand of the famed Lysippus. He writes of him as living at Samos, and interesting himself in a public capacity in the administration of the affairs of that place; yet, takes not the least notice of the Fable which Aristotle[1] tells us he spoke in behalf of a famous Demagogue there, when he was impeached for embezzling the public money; nor does he indeed give us the least hint of such a circumstance. An ingenious man might have laid together all the materials of this kind that are to be found in good old authors, and, by the help of a bright invention, connected and worked them up with success; we might have swallowed such an imposition well enough, because we should not have known how to contradict it: but in Planudes' case, the imposture is doubly discovered; first, as he has the unquestioned authority of antiquity against him; secondly, (and if the other did not condemn him) as he has introduced the witty, discreet, judicious Æsop, quibbling in a strain of low monastic waggery, and as archly dull as a Mountebank's Jester.

That there was a Life of Æsop, either written or traditionary, before Aristotle's time, is pretty plain; and that there was something of that kind extant in Augustus' reign, is, I think, as undoubted; since Phædrus mentions many transactions of his, during his abode at Athens. But it is as certain, that Planudes met with nothing of this kind; or, at least, that he met not with the accounts with which they were furnished, because of the omissions before-mentioned; and consequently with none so authentic and good. He seems to have thrown together some merry conceits which occurred to him in the course

[1] *Arist. Rhet.* Lib. ii. chap. 21.

of his reading, such as he thought were worthy of Æsop, and very confidently obtrudes them upon us for his. But, when at last he brings him to Delphos (where he was put to death by being thrown down from a precipice) that the Delphians might have some colour of justice for what they intended to do, he favours them with the same stratagem which Joseph made use of to bring back his brother Benjamin; they clandestinely convey a cup into his baggage, overtake him upon the road, after a strict search find him guilty; upon that pretence carry him back to the city, condemn and execute him.

As I would neither impose upon others, nor be imposed upon, I cannot, as some have done, let such stuff as this pass for the Life of the great Æsop. Planudes has little authority for any thing he has delivered concerning him; nay, as far as I can find, his whole account, from the beginning to the end, is mere invention, excepting some few circumstances; such as the place of his birth, and of his death; for in respect of the time in which he lived, he has blundered egregiously, by mentioning some incidents as contemporary with Æsop, which were far enough from being so. Xanthus, his supposed master, puts his wife into a passion, by bringing such a piece of deformity into her house, as our Author is described to be. Upon this, the master reproaches the slave for not uttering something witty, at a time that seemed to require it so much: and then Æsop comes out, slap dash, with a satirical reflection upon women, taken from Euripides, the famous Greek tragedian. Now Euripides happened not to be born till about fourscore years after Æsop's death. What credit, therefore, can be given to any thing Planudes says of him?

As to the place of his birth, I will allow, with the generality of those who have written about him, that it might have been some town in Phrygia Major: A. Gellius making mention of him, says, 'Æsopus ille, e Phrygia, Fabulator.' That he was also by condition a slave, we may conclude from what Phædrus[2] relates of him. But whether at both Samos and Athens, he does not particularly mention: though I am inclined to think it was at the latter only; because he often speaks of him as living at that place, and never at any other; which looks as if Phædrus believed that he had never lived any where else. Nor do I see how he could help being of that opinion, if others of the ancients, whose credit is equally good, did not carry him into other places. Aristotle introduces him (as I mentioned before) speaking in public to the Samians, upon the occasion of their Demagogue, or Prime Minister, being impeached for plundering the commonwealth.

I cannot but think Æsop was something above the degree of a slave, when he made such a figure as an eminent speaker in the Samian State. Perhaps he might have been in that low condition in the former part of his life; and therefore Phædrus, who had been of the same rank himself, might love to enlarge upon this circumstance, since he does not choose to represent him in any higher sphere. Unless we allow him to be speaking[3] in as public a capacity to the Athenians, upon the occasion of Pisistratus' seizing their liberties, as we have before supposed he did to the Samians. But, however, granting that he was once a slave, we have great authority that he was afterwards not only free, but in high veneration and esteem with all that knew him; especially all that were eminent for wisdom and virtue. Plutarch, in his Banquet of the Seven Wise Men, among several other illustrious persons, celebrated for their wit and knowledge, introduces Æsop. And, though in one place he seems to be ridiculed by one of the company for being of a clumsy mongrel shape; yet, in general, he is represented as very courtly and polite in his behaviour. He rallies Solon, and the rest, for taking too much liberty in prescribing rules for the conduct of sovereign princes; putting them in mind, that those who aspire to be the friends and counsellors of such, lose that character, and carry matters too far when they proceed to censure and find fault with them. Upon the credit of Plutarch, likewise, we fix the Life of Æsop in the time of Crœsus, King of Lydia; with whom he was in such esteem, as to be deputed by him to consult the Oracle at Delphos, and be sent as his envoy to Periander, King of Corinth; which

[2] Lib. ii. fab. 9. and Lib. iii. fab. 19.

[3] *Phæd.* Lib. i. fab. 2.

was about three hundred and twenty years after the time in which Homer lived, and five hundred and fifty before Christ.

Now, though this imaginary banquet of Plutarch does not carry with it the weight of a serious history, yet we may take it for granted, that he introduced nothing in his fictitious scene, which might contradict either the written or traditionary Life of Æsop; but rather chose to make every thing agree with it. Be that as it will, this is the sum of the account which we have to give of him. Nor, indeed, is it material for us to know the little trifling circumstances of his Life; as whether he lived at Samos or Athens, whether he was a slave or a freeman, whether handsome or ugly. He has left us a legacy in his writings that will preserve his memory dear and perpetual among us: what we have to do, therefore, is to show ourselves worthy of so valuable a present, and to act, in all respects, as near as we can to the will and intention of the donor. They who are governed by reason, need no other motive than the mere goodness of a thing to incite them to the practice of it. But men, for the most part, are so superficial in their inquiries, that they take all upon trust; and have no taste for any thing but what is supported by the vogue of others, and which it is inconsistent with the fashion of the world not to admire.

As an inducement, therefore, to such as these to like the person and conversation of Æsop, I must assure them that he was held in great esteem by most of the great wits of old. There is scarce an author among the ancient Greeks, who mixed any thing of morality in his writings, but either quotes or mentions him.

Whatever his person was, the beauties of his mind were very charming and engaging; that the most celebrated among the ancients were his admirers; that they speak of him with raptures, and pay as great a respect to him as to any of the other wise men who lived in the same age. Nor can I perceive, from any author of antiquity, that he was so deformed as the Monk has represented him. If he had, he must have been so monstrous and shocking to the eye, as not only to be a very improper envoy for a great king, but scarce fit to be admitted as a slave in any private family. Indeed, from what Plutarch hints of him, I suspect he had something particular in his mien; but rather odd than ugly, and more apt to excite mirth than disgust, in those that conversed with him. Perhaps something humorous displayed itself in his countenance as well as his writings; and it might be upon account of both, that he got the name of Γελωτοποιος, as Lucian calls him, and his works that of Γελοια. However, we will go a middle way; and without insisting upon his beauty, or giving into his deformity, allow him to have made a merry comical figure; at least as handsome as Socrates; but at the same time conclude, that this particularity in the frame of his body was so far from being of any disadvantage to him, that it gave a mirthful cast to every thing he said, and added a kind of poignancy to his conversation.

We have seen what opinion the ancients had of our Author, and his writings. Now, as to the manner of conveying instruction by Fables in general, though many good vouchers of antiquity sufficiently recommend it, yet to avoid tiring the reader's patience, I shall wave all quotations from thence, and lay before him the testimony of a modern; whose authority, in point of judgment, and consequently, in the present case, may be as readily acknowledged as that of any ancient of them all. "Fables[4]," says Mr. Addison, "were the first pieces of wit that made their appearance in the world; and have been still highly valued, not only in times of the greatest simplicity, but among the most polite ages of mankind. Jotham's Fable of the Trees is the oldest that is extant, and as beautiful as any which have been made since that time. Nathan's Fable of the poor Man and his Lamb, is likewise more ancient than any that is extant, besides the above-mentioned, and had so good an effect, as to convey instruction to the ear of a king, without offending it, and to bring the man after God's own heart to a right sense of his guilt, and his duty. We find Æsop in the most distant ages of Greece. And, if we look into the very beginning of the commonwealth of Rome, we see a mutiny among the common people appeased by the Fable of the Belly and the Members[5]; which was indeed very proper

[4] Spect. No. 183.

[5] Fab. liv.

to gain the attention of an incensed rabble, at a time, when, perhaps, they would have torn to pieces any man who had preached the same doctrine to them, in an open and direct manner. As Fables took their birth in the very infancy of learning, they never flourished more than when learning was at its greatest height. To justify this assertion, I shall put my reader in mind of Horace, the greatest wit and critic in the Augustan age; and of Boileau, the most correct poet among the moderns; not to mention La Fontaine, who, by this way of writing, is come more into vogue than any other author of our times." After this, he proceeds to give some account of that kind of Fable in which the passions, and other imaginary beings, are actors; and concludes with a most beautiful one of that sort, of his own contriving. In another place, he gives us a translation from Homer of that inimitable Fable comprised in the interview between Jupiter and Juno, when the latter made use of the girdle of Venus, to recall the affection of her husband; a piece never sufficiently to be recommended to the perusal of such of the fair sex, as are ambitious of acquitting themselves handsomely in point of conjugal complacence. But I must not omit the excellent Preface, by which the Fable is introduced, "Reading is to the mind[6]," says he, "what exercise is to the body: as by the one, health is preserved, strengthened, and invigorated; by the other virtue (which is the health of the mind) is kept alive, cherished, and confirmed. But, as exercise becomes tedious and painful when we make use of it only as the means of health, so reading is too apt to grow uneasy and burdensome, when we apply ourselves to it only for our improvement in virtue. For this reason, the virtue which we gather from a Fable or an allegory, is like the health we get by hunting, as we are engaged in an agreeable pursuit that draws us on with pleasure, and makes its insensible of the fatigues that accompany it."

[6] Tatler, No. 147.

FABLE I

THE COCK AND THE JEWEL

A brisk young Cock, in company with two or three pullets, his mistresses, raking upon a dunghill for something to entertain them with, happened to scratch up a Jewel. He knew what it was well enough, for it sparkled with an exceeding bright lustre; but, not knowing what to do with it, endeavoured to cover his ignorance under a gay contempt; so, shrugging up his wings, shaking his head, and putting on a grimace, he expressed himself to this purpose: – 'Indeed, you are a very fine thing; but I know not any business you have here. I make no scruple of declaring that my taste lies quite another way; and I had rather have one grain of dear delicious barley, than all the Jewels under the sun.'

APPLICATION

There are several people in the world that pass, with some, for well accomplished gentlemen, and very pretty fellows, though they are as great strangers to the true uses of virtue and knowledge as the Cock upon the dunghill is to the real value of the Jewel. He palliates his ignorance by pretending that his taste lies another way. But, whatever gallant airs people may give themselves upon these occasions, without dispute, the solid advantages of virtue, and the durable pleasures of learning, are as much to be preferred before other objects of the senses, as the finest brilliant diamond is above a barley-corn. The greatest blockheads would appear to understand what at the same time they affect to despise: and nobody yet was ever so vicious, as to have the impudence to declare, in public, that virtue was not a fine thing.

But still, among the idle, sauntering young fellows of the age, who have leisure as well to cultivate and improve the faculties of the mind, as to dress and embellish the body, how many are there who spend their days in raking after new scenes of debauchery, in comparison of those few who know how to relish more reasonable entertainments! Honest, undesigning good sense is so unfashionable, that he must be a bold man who, at this time of day, attempts to bring it into esteem.

How disappointed is the youth who, in the midst of his amorous pursuits, endeavouring to plunder an outside of bloom and beauty, finds a treasure of impenetrable virtue concealed within! And why may it not be said, how delighted are the fair sex when, from among a crowd of empty, frolic, conceited admirers, they find out, and distinguish with their good opinion, a man of sense, with a plain, unaffected person, which, at first sight, they did not like!

FABLE II

THE WOLF AND THE LAMB

One hot, sultry day, a Wolf and a Lamb happened to come, just at the same time, to quench their thirst in the stream of a clear, silver brook that ran tumbling down the side of a rocky mountain. The Wolf stood upon the higher ground, and the Lamb at some distance from him down the current. However, the Wolf, having a mind to pick a quarrel with him, asked him, what he meant by disturbing the water, and making it so muddy that he could not drink? and, at the same time demanded satisfaction. The Lamb, frightened at this threatening charge, told him, in a tone as mild as possible, that, with humble submission, he could not conceive how that could be; since the water which he drank, ran down from the Wolf to him, and therefore it could not be disturbed so far up the stream. 'Be that as it will,' replies the Wolf, 'you are a rascal, and I have been told that you treated me with ill language, behind my back, about half a year ago.' – 'Upon my word,' says the Lamb, 'the time you mention was before I was born.' The Wolf, finding it to no purpose to argue any longer against truth, fell into a great passion, snarling and foaming at the mouth, as if he had been mad; and drawing nearer to the Lamb, 'Sirrah,' says he, 'if it was not you, it was your father, and that is all one.' – So he seized the poor innocent, helpless thing, tore it to pieces, and made a meal of it.

APPLICATION

The thing which is pointed at in this fable is so obvious, that it will be impertinent to multiply words about it. When a cruel ill-natured man has a mind to abuse one inferior to himself, either in power or courage, though he has not given the least occasion for it, how does he resemble the Wolf! whose envious, rapacious temper could not bear to see innocence live quietly in its neighbourhood. In short, wherever ill people are in power, innocence and integrity are sure to be persecuted: the more vicious the community is, the better countenance they have for their own villanous measures. To practise honesty in bad times, is being liable to suspicion enough; but if any one should dare to prescribe it, it is ten to one but he would be impeached of high crimes and misdemeanors: for to stand up for justice in a degenerate and corrupt state, is tacitly to upbraid the government, and seldom fails of pulling down vengeance upon the head of him that offers to stir in its defence. Where cruelty and malice are in combination with power, nothing is so easy as for them to find a pretence to tyrannize over innocence, and exercise all manner of injustice.

FABLE III

THE LION AND THE FOUR BULLS

Four Bulls, which had entered into a very strict friendship, kept always near one another, and fed together. The Lion often saw them, and as often had a mind to make one of them his prey; but, though he could easily have subdued any of them singly, yet he was afraid to attack the whole alliance, as knowing they would have been too hard for him, and therefore contented himself, for the present, with keeping at a distance. At last, perceiving no attempt was to be made upon them, as long as this combination held, he took occasion, by whispers and hints, to foment jealousies, and raise divisions among them. This stratagem succeeded so well, that the Bulls grew cold and reserved towards one another, which soon after ripened into a downright hatred and aversion; and, at last, ended in a total separation. The Lion had now obtained his ends; and, as impossible as it was for him to hurt them while they were united, he found no difficulty, now they were parted, to seize and devour every Bull of them, one after another.

APPLICATION

The moral of this fable is so well known and allowed, that to go about to enlighten it, would be like holding a candle to the sun. "A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand;" and as undisputed a maxim as it is, was, however, thought necessary to be urged to the attention of mankind, by the best Man that ever lived. And since friendships and alliances are of so great importance to our well-being and happiness, we cannot be too often cautioned not to let them be broken by tale-bearers and whisperers, or any other contrivance of our enemies.

FABLE IV

THE FROG AND THE FOX

A Frog, leaping out of a lake, and taking the advantage of a rising ground, made proclamation to all the beasts of the forest, that he was an able physician, and, for curing all manner of distempers, would turn his back to no person living. This discourse, uttered in a parcel of hard, cramp words, which nobody understood, made the beasts admire his learning, and give credit to every thing he said. At last the Fox, who was present, with indignation asked him, how he could have the impudence, with those thin lantern-jaws, that meagre pale phiz, and blotched spotted body, to set up for one who was able to cure the infirmities of others.

APPLICATION

A sickly, infirm look, is as disadvantageous in a physician, as that of a rake in a clergyman, or a sheepish one in a soldier. If this moral contains any thing further, it is, that we should not set up for rectifying enormities in others, while we labour under the same ourselves. Good advice ought always to be followed, without our being prejudiced upon account of the person from whom it comes: but it is seldom that men can be brought to think us worth minding, when we prescribe cures for maladies with which ourselves are infected. "Physician, heal thyself," is too scriptural not to be applied upon such an occasion; and, if we would avoid being the jest of an audience, we must be sound, and free from those diseases of which we would endeavour to cure others. How shocked must people have been to hear a preacher, for a whole hour, declaim against drunkenness, when his own infirmity has been such, that he could neither bear nor forbear drinking; and, perhaps, was the only person in the congregation who made the doctrine at that time necessary! Others too have been very zealous in exploding crimes, for which none were more suspected than themselves: but let such silly hypocrites remember, that they whose eyes want couching, are the most improper people in the world to set up for oculists.

FABLE V

THE ASS EATING THISTLES

An Ass was loaded with good provisions of several sorts, which, in time of harvest, he was carrying into the field for his master and the reapers to dine upon. By the way he met with a fine large Thistle, and, being very hungry, began to mumble it; which, while he was doing, he entered into this reflection – 'How many greedy epicures would think themselves happy, amidst such a variety of delicate viands as I now carry! But to me, this bitter prickly Thistle is more savoury and relishing than the most exquisite and sumptuous banquet.'

APPLICATION

Happiness and misery, and oftentimes pleasure and pain, exist merely in our opinion, and are no more to be accounted for than the difference of tastes. "That which is one man's meat, is another man's poison," is a proposition that ought to be allowed in all particulars, where the opinion is concerned, as well as in eating and drinking. Our senses must inform us whether a thing pleases or displeases, before we can declare our judgment of it; and that is to any man good or evil, which his own understanding suggests to him to be so, and not that which is agreeable to another's fancy. And yet, as reasonable and as necessary as it is to grant this, how apt are we to wonder at people for not liking this or that, or how can they think so and so! This childish humour of wondering at the different tastes and opinions of others, occasions much uneasiness among the generality of mankind. But, if we considered things rightly, why should we be more concerned at others differing from us in their way of thinking upon any subject whatever, than at their liking cheese, or mustard; one, or both of which, we may happen to dislike? In truth, he that expects all mankind should be of his opinion, is much more stupid and unreasonable than the Ass in the fable.

FABLE VI

THE LARK AND HER YOUNG ONES

A Lark, who had Young Ones in a field of corn which was almost ripe, was under some fear lest the reapers should come to reap it before her young brood were fledged, and able to remove from the place: wherefore, upon flying abroad to look for food, she left this charge with them – that they should take notice what they heard talked of in her absence, and tell her of it when she came back again. When she was gone, they heard the owner of the corn call to his son – 'Well,' says he, 'I think this corn is ripe enough; I would have you go early to-morrow, and desire our friends and neighbours to come and help us to reap it.' When the Old Lark came home, the Young Ones fell a quivering and chirping round her, and told her what had happened, begging her to remove them as fast as she could. The mother bid them be easy; 'for,' says she, 'if the owner depends upon friends and neighbours, I am pretty sure the corn will not be reaped to-morrow.' Next day she went out again, upon the same occasion, and left the same orders with them as before. The owner came, and stayed, expecting those he had sent to: but the sun grew hot, and nothing was done, for not a soul came to help him. 'Then,' says he to his son, 'I perceive these friends of ours are not to be depended upon; so that you must even go to your uncles and cousins, and tell them, I desire they would be here betimes to-morrow morning to help us to reap.' Well, this the Young Ones, in a great fright, reported also to their mother. 'If that be all,' says she, 'do not be frightened, children, for kindred and relations do not use to be so very forward to serve one another; but take particular notice what you hear said the next time, and be sure you let me know it.' She went abroad the next day, as usual; and the owner, finding his relations as slack as the rest of his neighbours, said to his son, 'Hark ye! George, do you get a couple of good sickles ready against to-morrow morning, and we will even reap the corn ourselves.' When the Young Ones told their mother this, 'Then,' says she, 'we must be gone indeed; for, when a man undertakes to do his business himself, it is not so likely that he will be disappointed.' So she removed her Young Ones immediately, and the corn was reaped the next day by the good man and his son.

APPLICATION

Never depend upon the assistance of friends and relations in any thing which you are able to do yourself; for nothing is more fickle and uncertain. The man, who relies upon another for the execution of any affair of importance, is not only kept in a wretched and slavish suspense while he expects the issue of the matter, but generally meets with a disappointment. While he, who lays the chief stress of his business upon himself, and depends upon his own industry and attention for the success of his affairs, is in the fairest way to attain his end: and, if at last he should miscarry, has this to comfort him – that it was not through his own negligence, and a vain expectation of the assistance of friends. To stand by ourselves, as much as possible, to exert our own strength and vigilance in the prosecution of our affairs, is god-like, being the result of a most noble and highly exalted reason; but they who procrastinate and defer the business of life by an idle dependance upon others, in things which it is in their own power to effect, sink down into a kind of stupid abject slavery, and show themselves unworthy of the talents with which human nature is dignified.

FABLE VII

THE COCK AND THE FOX

The Fox, passing early one summer's morning near a farm-yard, was caught in a springe, which the farmer had planted there for that end. The Cock, at a distance, saw what happened; and, hardly yet daring to trust himself too near so dangerous a foe, approached him cautiously, and peeped at him, not without some horror and dread of mind. Reynard no sooner perceived it, but he addressed himself to him, with all the designing artifice imaginable. 'Dear cousin,' says he, 'you see what an unfortunate accident has befallen me here, and all upon your account: for, as I was creeping through yonder hedge, in my way homeward, I heard you crow, and was resolved to ask you how you did before I went any further: but, by the way, I met with this disaster; and therefore now I must become an humble suitor to you for a knife to cut this plaguy string; or, at least, that you would conceal my misfortune, till I have gnawed it asunder with my teeth.' The Cock, seeing how the case stood, made no reply, but posted away as fast as he could, and gave the farmer an account of the whole matter; who, taking a good weapon along with him, came and did the Fox's business, before he could have time to contrive his escape.

APPLICATION

Though there is no quality of the mind more graceful in itself, or that renders it more amiable to others, than the having a tender regard to those who are in distress; yet we may err, even in this point, unless we take care to let our compassion flow out upon proper objects only. When the innocent fall into misfortune, it is the part of a generous brave spirit to contribute to their redemption; or, if that be impossible, to administer something to their comfort and support. But, when wicked men, who have been enemies to their fellow-subjects, are entrapped in their own pernicious schemes, he that labours to deliver them, makes himself an associate in their crimes, and becomes as great an enemy to the public as those whom he would screen and protect.

When highwaymen and housebreakers are taken, condemned, and going to satisfy justice, at the expense of their vile paltry lives; who are they that grieve for them, and would be glad to rescue them from the rope? Not honest men, we may be sure. The rest of the thieving fraternity would, perhaps, commiserate their condition, and be ready to mutiny in their favour: nay, the rascally solicitor, who had been employed upon their account, would be vexed that his negociations had succeeded no better, and be afraid of losing his reputation, among other delinquents, for the future: but every friend to justice would have no reason to be dissatisfied at any thing but a mournful reflection, which he could not forbear making, that, while these little criminals swing for some trifling inconsiderable rapine, others, so transcendently their superiors in fraud and plunder, escape with a whole skin.

FABLE VIII

THE FOX IN THE WELL

A Fox having fallen into a Well, made a shift, by sticking his claws into the sides, to keep his head above water. Soon after, a Wolf came and peeped over the brink; to whom the Fox applied himself very earnestly for assistance: entreating, that he would help him to a rope, or something of that kind, which might favour his escape. The Wolf, moved with compassion at his misfortune, could not forbear expressing his concern: 'Ah! poor Reynard,' says he, 'I am sorry for you with all my heart; how could you possibly come into this melancholy condition?' – 'Nay, prithee, friend,' replies the Fox, 'if you wish me well, do not stand pitying of me, but lend me some succour as fast as you can: for pity is but cold comfort when one is up to the chin in water, and within a hair's breadth of starving or drowning.'

APPLICATION

Pity, indeed, is of itself but poor comfort at any time; and, unless it produces something more substantial, is rather impertinently troublesome, than any way agreeable. To stand bemoaning the misfortunes of our friends, without offering some expedient to alleviate them, is only echoing to their grief, and putting them in mind that they are miserable. He is truly my friend who, with a ready presence of mind, supports me; not he who condoles with me upon my ill success, and says he is sorry for my loss. In short, a favour or obligation is doubled by being well-timed; and he is the best benefactor, who knows our necessities, and complies with our wishes, even before we ask him.

FABLE IX

THE WOLVES AND THE SHEEP

The Wolves and the Sheep had been a long time in a state of war together. At last a cessation of arms was proposed, in order to a treaty of peace, and hostages were to be delivered on both sides for security. The Wolves proposed that the Sheep should give up their dogs, on the one side, and that they would deliver up their young ones, on the other. This proposal was agreed to; but no sooner executed, than the young Wolves began to howl for want of their dams. The old ones took this opportunity to cry out, the treaty was broke; and so falling upon the Sheep, who were destitute of their faithful guardians the dogs, they worried and devoured them without control.

APPLICATION

In all our transactions with mankind, even in the most private and low life, we should have a special regard how, and with whom, we trust ourselves. Men, in this respect, ought to look upon each other as Wolves, and to keep themselves under a secure guard, and in a continual posture of defence. Particularly upon any treaties of importance, the securities on both sides should be strictly considered; and each should act with so cautious a view to their own interest, as never to pledge or part with that which is the very essence and basis of their safety and well-being. And if this be a just and reasonable rule for men to govern themselves by, in their own private affairs, how much more fitting and necessary is it in any conjuncture wherein the public is concerned? If the enemy should demand our whole army for an hostage, the danger in our complying with it would be so gross and apparent, that we could not help observing it: but, perhaps, a country may equally expose itself by parting with a particular town or general, as its whole army; its safety, not seldom, depending as much upon one of the former, as upon the latter. In short, hostages and securities may be something very dear to us, but ought never to be given up, if our welfare and preservation have any dependance upon them.

FABLE X

THE EAGLE AND THE FOX

An Eagle that had young ones, looking out for something to feed them with, happened to spy a Fox's cub, that lay basking itself abroad in the sun. She made a stoop, and trussed it immediately; but before she had carried it quite off, the old Fox coming home, implored her, with tears in her eyes, to spare her cub, and pity the distress of a poor fond mother, who should think no affliction so great as that of losing her child. The Eagle, whose nest was up in a very high tree, thought herself secure enough from all projects of revenge, and so bore away the cub to her young ones, without showing any regard to the supplications of the Fox. But that subtle creature, highly incensed at this outrageous barbarity, ran to an altar, where some country people had been sacrificing a kid in the open fields, and catching up a firebrand in her mouth, made towards the tree where the Eagle's nest was, with a resolution of revenge. She had scarce ascended the first branches, when the Eagle, terrified with the approaching ruin of herself and family, begged of the Fox to desist, and, with much submission, returned her the cub again safe and sound.

APPLICATION

This fable is a warning to us not to deal hardly or injuriously by any body. The consideration of our being in a high condition of life, and those we hurt, far below us, will plead little or no excuse for us in this case: for there is scarce a creature of so despicable a rank, but is capable of avenging itself some way, and at some time or other. When great men happen to be wicked, how little scruple do they make of oppressing their poor neighbours! They are perched upon a lofty station, and have built their nest on high; and, having outgrown all feelings of humanity, are insensible of any pangs of remorse. The widow's tears, the orphan's cries, and the curses of the miserable, like javelins thrown by the hand of a feeble old man, fall by the way, and never reach their heart. But let such a one, in the midst of his flagrant injustice, remember, how easy a matter it is, notwithstanding his superior distance, for the meanest vassal to be revenged of him. The bitterness of an affliction, even where cunning is wanting, may animate the poorest spirit with resolutions of vengeance; and, when once that fury is thoroughly awakened, we know not what she will require before she is lulled to rest again. The most powerful tyrants cannot prevent a resolved assassination; there are a thousand different ways for any private man to do the business, who is heartily disposed to it, and willing to satisfy his appetite for revenge, at the expense of his life. An old woman may clap a firebrand in the palace of a prince; and it is in the power of a poor weak fool to destroy the children of the mighty.

FABLE XI

THE WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

A Wolf, clothing himself in the skin of a Sheep, and getting in among the flock, by this means took the opportunity to devour many of them. At last the shepherd discovered him, and cunningly fastening a rope about his neck, tied him up to a tree which stood hard by. Some other shepherds happening to pass that way, and observing what he was about, drew near, and expressed their amazement at it. 'What,' says one of them, 'brother, do you make hanging of Sheep?' – 'No,' replies the other; 'but I make hanging of a Wolf whenever I catch him, though in the habit and garb of a Sheep.' Then he showed them their mistake, and they applauded the justice of the execution.

APPLICATION

This fable shows us, that no regard is to be had to the mere habit or outside of any person, but to undisguised worth and intrinsic virtue. When we place our esteem upon the external garb, before we inform ourselves of the qualities which it covers, we may often mistake evil for good, and, instead of a Sheep, take a Wolf into our protection. Therefore, however innocent or sanctified any one may appear, as to the vesture wherewith he is clothed, we may act rashly, because we may be imposed upon, if from thence we take it for granted, that he is inwardly as good and righteous as his outward robe would persuade us he is. Men of judgment and penetration do not use to give an implicit credit to a particular habit, or a peculiar colour, but love to make a more exact scrutiny; for he that will not come up to the character of an honest, good kind of man, when stripped of his Sheep's Clothing, is but the more detestable for his intended imposture; as the Wolf was but the more obnoxious to the shepherd's resentment, by wearing a habit so little suiting with his manners.

FABLE XII

THE FOWLER AND THE RING-DOVE

A fowler took his gun, and went into the woods a-shooting. He spied a Ring-Dove among the branches of an oak, and intended to kill it. He clapped the piece to his shoulder, and took his aim accordingly. But, just as he was going to pull the trigger, an adder, which he had trod upon under the grass, stung him so painfully in the leg, that he was forced to quit his design, and threw his gun down in a passion. The poison immediately infected his blood, and his whole body began to mortify; which, when he perceived, he could not help owning it to be just. 'Fate,' says he, 'has brought destruction upon me, while I was contriving the death of another.'

APPLICATION

This is another lesson against injustice; a topic in which our just Author abounds. And, if we consider the matter fairly, we must allow it to be as reasonable that some one should do violence to us, as we should commit it upon another. When we are impartial in our reflections, thus we must always think. The unjust man, with a hardened unfeeling heart, can do a thousand bitter things to others: but if a single calamity touches himself, oh, how tender he is! How insupportable is the uneasiness it occasions! Why should we think others born to hard treatment more than ourselves? Or imagine it can be reasonable to do to another, what we ourselves should be unwilling to suffer? In our behaviour to all mankind, we need only ask ourselves these plain questions, and our consciences will tell us how to act. Conscience, like a good valuable domestic, plays the remembrancer to us upon all occasions, and gives us a gentle twitch, when we are going to do a wrong thing. It does not, like the adder in the fable, bite us to death, but only gives us kind cautions. However, if we neglect these just and frequent warnings, and continue in a course of wickedness and injustice, do not let us be surprised if Providence thinks fit, at last, to give us a home sting, and to exercise a little retaliation upon us.

FABLE XIII

THE SOW AND THE WOLF

A Sow had just farrowed, and lay in the stye, with her whole litter of pigs about her. A Wolf who longed for one of them, but knew not how to come at it, endeavoured to insinuate himself into the Sow's good opinion: and, accordingly, coming up to her – 'How does the good woman in the straw do?' says he. 'Can I be of any service to you, Mrs. Sow, in relation to your little family here? If you have a mind to go abroad, and air yourself a little, or so, you may depend upon it, I will take as much care of your pigs as you could yourself.' – 'Your humble servant,' says the Sow, 'I thoroughly understand your meaning; and, to let you know I do, I must be so free as to tell you, I had rather have your room than your company; and, therefore, if you would act like a Wolf of honour, and oblige me, I beg I may never see your face again.'

APPLICATION

The being officiously good-natured and civil is something so uncommon in the world, that one cannot hear a man make profession of it without being surprised, or, at least, suspecting the disinterestedness of his intentions. Especially, when one who is a stranger to us, or though known, is ill-esteemed by us, will be making offers of services, we have great reason to look to ourselves, and exert a shyness and coldness towards him. We should resolve not to receive even favours from bad kind of people; for should it happen that some immediate mischief was not couched in them, yet it is dangerous to have obligations to such, or to give them an opportunity of making a communication with us.

FABLE XIV

THE HORSE AND THE ASS

The Horse, adorned with his great war-saddle, and champing his foaming bridle, came thundering along the way, and made the mountains echo with his loud shrill neighing. He had not gone far, before he overtook an Ass, who was labouring under a heavy burden, and moving slowly on in the same track with himself. Immediately he called out to him, in a haughty imperious tone, and threatened to trample him in the dirt, if he did not break the way for him. The poor patient Ass, not daring to dispute the matter, quietly got out of his way as fast as he could, and let him go by. Not long after this, the same Horse, in an engagement with the enemy, happened to be shot in the eye, which made him unfit for show, or any military business; so he was stripped of his fine ornaments, and sold to a carrier. The Ass, meeting him in this forlorn condition, thought that now it was his time to insult; and so, says he, 'Hey-day, friend, is it you? Well, I always believed that pride of yours would one day have a fall.'

APPLICATION

Pride is a very unaccountable vice: many people fall into it unawares, and are often led into it by motives, which, if they considered things rightly, would make them abhor the very thoughts of it. There is no man that thinks well of himself, but desires that the rest of the world should think so too. Now it is the wrong measures we take in endeavouring after this, that expose us to discerning people in that light which they call pride, and which is so far from giving us any advantage in their esteem, that it renders us despicable and ridiculous. It is an affectation of appearing considerable, that puts men upon being proud and insolent; and their very being so makes them, infallibly, little, and inconsiderable. The man that claims and calls for reverence and respect, deserves none; he that asks for applause, is sure to lose it; the certain way to get it is to seem to shun it; and the humble man, according to the maxims even of this world, is the most likely to be exalted. He that, in his words or actions, pleads for superiority, and rather chooses to do an ill action, than condescend to do a good one, acts like the Horse, and is as void of reason and understanding. The rich and the powerful want nothing but the love and esteem of mankind to complete their felicity; and these they are sure to obtain by a good-humoured, kind condescension; and as certain of being every body's aversion, while the least tincture of overbearing rudeness is perceptible in their words or actions. What brutal tempers must they be of, who can be easy and indifferent, while they know themselves to be universally hated, though in the midst of affluence and power! But this is not all; for if ever the wheel of fortune should whirl them from the top to the bottom, instead of friendship or commiseration, they will meet with nothing but contempt; and that with much more justice than ever they themselves exerted it towards others.

FABLE XV

THE WOLF, THE LAMB, AND THE GOAT

A Wolf meeting a Lamb, one day, in company with a Goat – 'Child,' says he, 'you are mistaken; this is none of your mother; she is yonder;' pointing to a flock of sheep at a distance. – 'It may be so,' says the Lamb; 'the person that happened to conceive me, and afterwards bore me a few months in her belly, because she could not help it, and then dropped me, she did not care where, and left me to the wide world, is, I suppose, what you call my mother; but I look upon this charitable Goat as such, that took compassion on me in my poor, helpless, destitute condition, and gave me suck; sparing it out of the mouths of her own kids, rather than I should want it.' – 'But sure,' says he, 'you have a greater regard for her that gave you life, than for any body else.' – 'She gave me life! I deny that. She that could not so much as tell whether I should be black or white, had a great hand in giving me life, to be sure! But, supposing it were so, I am mightily obliged to her, truly, for contriving to let me be of the male-kind, so that I go every day in danger of the butcher. What reason then have I to have a greater regard for one to whom I am so little indebted for any part of my being, than for those from whom I have received all the benevolence and kindness which have hitherto supported me in life?'

APPLICATION

It is they whose goodness makes them our parents, that properly claim filial respect from us, and not those who are such only out of necessity. The duties between parents and their children are relative and reciprocal. By all laws, natural as well as civil, it is expected that the parents should cherish and provide for the child, till it is able to shift for itself; and that the child, with a mutual tenderness, should depend upon the parent for its sustenance, and yield it a reasonable obedience. Yet, through the depravity of human nature, we very often see these laws violated, and the relations before-mentioned treating one another with as much virulence as enemies of different countries are capable of. Through the natural impatience and protervity of youth, we observe the first occasion for any animosity most frequently arising from their side; but, however, there are not wanting examples of undutiful parents: and, when a father, by using a son ill, and denying him such an education and such an allowance as his circumstances can well afford, gives him occasion to withdraw his respect from him, to urge his begetting of him as the sole obligation to duty, is talking like a silly unthinking dotard. Mutual benevolence must be kept up between relations, as well as friends; for, without this cement, whatever you please to call the building, it is only a castle in the air, a thing to be talked of, without the least reality.

FABLE XVI

THE KITE AND THE PIGEONS

A Kite, who had kept sailing in the air for many days near a dove-house, and made a stoop at several pigeons, but all to no purpose (for they were too nimble for him), at last had recourse to stratagem, and took his opportunity one day to make a declaration to them, in which he set forth his own just and good intentions, who had nothing more at heart than the defence and protection of the Pigeons in their ancient rights and liberties, and how concerned he was at their fears and jealousies of a foreign invasion, especially their unjust and unreasonable suspicions of himself, as if he intended, by force of arms, to break in upon their constitution, and erect a tyrannical government over them. To prevent all which, and thoroughly to quiet their minds, he thought proper to propose to them such terms of alliance and articles of peace as might for ever cement a good understanding between them: the principal of which was, that they should accept of him for their king, and invest him with all kingly privilege and prerogative over them. The poor simple Pigeons consented: the Kite took the coronation oath, after a very solemn manner, on his part, and the Doves, the oaths of allegiance and fidelity, on theirs. But much time had not passed over their heads, before the good Kite pretended that it was part of his prerogative to devour a Pigeon whenever he pleased. And this he was not contented to do himself only, but instructed the rest of the royal family in the same kingly arts of government. The Pigeons, reduced to this miserable condition, said one to the other, 'Ah! we deserve no better! Why did we let him come in!

APPLICATION

What can this fable be applied to but the exceeding blindness and stupidity of that part of mankind who wantonly and foolishly trust their native rights of liberty without good security? Who often choose for guardians of their lives and fortunes, persons abandoned to the most unsociable vices; and seldom have any better excuse for such an error in politics than, that they were deceived in their expectation; or never thoroughly knew the manners of their king till he had got them entirely in his power: which, however, is notoriously false; for many, with the Doves in the fable, are so silly, that they would admit of a Kite, rather than be without a king. The truth is, we ought not to incur the possibility of being deceived in so important a matter as this: an unlimited power should not be trusted in the hands of any one who is not endued with a perfection more than human.

FABLE XVII

THE COUNTRY MOUSE AND THE CITY MOUSE

An honest, plain, sensible Country Mouse, is said to have entertained at his hole one day a fine Mouse of the Town. Having formerly been playfellows together, they were old acquaintance, which served as an apology for the visit. However, as master of the house, he thought himself obliged to do the honours of it, in all respects, and to make as great a stranger of his guest as he possibly could. In order to this, he set before him a reserve of delicate grey peas and bacon, a dish of fine oatmeal, some parings of new cheese, and, to crown all with a dessert, a remnant of a charming mellow apple. In good manners, he forbore to eat any himself, lest the stranger should not have enough; but, that he might seem to bear the other company, sat and nibbled a piece of a wheaten straw very busily. At last says the spark of the town, 'Old crony, give me leave to be a little free with you; how can you bear to live in this nasty, dirty, melancholy hole here, with nothing but woods and meadows, and mountains, and rivulets, about you? Do not you prefer the conversation of the world to the chirping of birds, and the splendour of a court to the rude aspect of an uncultivated desert! Come, take my word for it, you will find it a change for the better. Never stand considering, but away this moment. Remember, we are not immortal, and therefore have no time to lose. Make sure of to-day, and spend it as agreeably as you can; you know not what may happen to-morrow.' In short, these and such like arguments prevailed, and his Country Acquaintance was resolved to go to town that night. So they both set out upon their journey together, proposing to sneak in after the close of the evening. They did so; and, about midnight, made their entry into a certain great house, where there had been an extraordinary entertainment the day before, and several tit-bits, which some of the servants had purloined, were hid under the seat of a window. The Country Guest was immediately placed in the midst of a rich Persian carpet: and now it was the Courtier's turn to entertain; who, indeed, acquitted himself in that capacity with the utmost readiness and address, changing the courses as elegantly, and tasting every thing first as judiciously, as any clerk of a kitchen, the other sat and enjoyed himself like a delighted epicure, tickled to the last degree with this new turn of his affairs; when, on a sudden, a noise of somebody opening the door made them start from their seats, and scuttle in confusion about the dining-room. Our Country Friend, in particular, was ready to die with fear at the barking of a huge mastiff or two, which opened their throats just about the same time, and made the whole house echo. At last, recovering himself – 'Well,' says he, 'if this be your town life, much good may do you with it: give me my poor quiet hole again, with my homely, but comfortable, grey peas.'

APPLICATION

A moderate fortune, with a quiet retirement in the country, is preferable to the greatest affluence which is attended with care and the perplexity of business, and inseparable from the noise and hurry of the town. The practice of the generality of people of the best taste, it is to be owned, is directly against us in this point; but, when it is considered that this practise of theirs proceeds rather from a compliance with the fashion of the times, than their own private thoughts, the objection is of no force. Among the great numbers of men who have received a learned education, how few are there but either have their fortunes entirely to make, or, at least, think they deserve to have, and ought not to lose the opportunity of getting, somewhat more than their fathers have left them! The town is the field of action for volunteers of this kind; and whatever fondness they may have for the country, yet they must stay till their circumstances will admit of a retreat thither. But sure there never was a

man yet, who lived in a constant return of trouble and fatigue in town, as all men of business do in some degree or other, but has formed to himself some end of getting some sufficient competency, which may enable him to purchase a quiet possession in the country, where he may indulge his genius, and give up his old age to that easy smooth life which, in the tempest of business, he had so often longed for. Can any thing argue more strongly for a country life, than to observe what a long course of labour people go through, and what difficulties they encounter to come at it? They look upon it, at a distance, like a kind of heaven, a place of rest and happiness; and are pushing forward through the rugged thorny cares of the world, to make their way towards it. If there are many who, though born to plentiful fortunes, yet live most part of their time in the noise, the smoke, and hurry of the town, we shall find, upon inquiry, that necessary indispensible business is the real or pretended plea which most of them have to make for it. The court and the senate require the attendance of some: lawsuits, and the proper direction of trade, engage others: they who have a sprightly wit and an elegant taste for conversation, will resort to the place which is frequented by people of the same turn, whatever aversion they may otherwise have for it; and others, who have no such pretence, have yet this to say, that they follow the fashion. They who appear to have been men of the best sense amongst the ancients, always recommended the country as the most proper scene for innocence, ease, and virtuous pleasure; and, accordingly, lost no opportunities of enjoying it: and men of the greatest distinction among the moderns, have ever thought themselves most happy when they could be decently spared from the employments which the excellency of their talents necessarily threw them into, to embrace the charming leisure of a country life.

FABLE XVIII

THE SWALLOW AND OTHER BIRDS

A farmer was sowing his field with flax. The Swallow observed it, and desired the other Birds to assist her in picking the seed up, and in destroying it; telling them, that flax was that pernicious material of which the thread was composed which made the fowler's nets, and by that means contributed to the ruin of so many innocent birds. But the poor Swallow not having the good fortune to be regarded, the flax sprung up, and appeared above the ground. She then put them in mind once more of their impending danger, and wished them to pluck it up in the bud, before it went any further. They still neglected her warnings; and the flax grew up into the high stalk. She yet again desired them to attack it, for that it was not yet too late. But all that she could get was to be ridiculed and despised for a silly pretending prophet. The Swallow finding all her remonstrances availed nothing, was resolved to leave the society of such unthinking, careless creatures, before it was too late. So quitting the woods, she repaired to the houses, and forsaking the conversation of the Birds, has ever since made her abode among the dwellings of men.

APPLICATION

As men, we should always exercise so much humanity as to endeavour the welfare of mankind, particularly of our acquaintance and relations: and, if by nothing further, at least by our good advice. When we have done this, and, if occasion required, continued to repeat it a second or third time, we shall have acquitted ourselves sufficiently from any imputation upon their miscarriage; and having nothing more to do but to separate ourselves from them, that we may not be involved in their ruin, or be supposed to partake of their error. This is an excommunication which reason allows. For as it would be cruel, on the one side, to prosecute and hurt people for being mistaken, so, on the other, it would be indiscreet and over complaisant, to keep them company through all their wrong notions, and act contrary to our opinion out of pure civility.

FABLE XIX

THE HUNTED BEAVER

It is said that a Beaver (a creature which lives chiefly in the water) has a certain part about him which is good in physic, and that, upon this account, he is often hunted down and killed. Once upon a time, as one of these creatures was hard pursued by the dogs, and knew not how to escape, recollecting with himself the reason of his being thus persecuted, with a great resolution and presence of mind, he bit off the part which his hunters wanted, and throwing it towards them, by these means escaped with his life.

APPLICATION

However it is among beasts, there are few human creatures but what are hunted for something else besides either their lives or the pleasure of hunting them. The inquisition would hardly be so keen against the Jews, if they had not something belonging to them which their persecutors esteem more valuable than their souls; which whenever that wise, but obstinate people, can prevail with themselves to part with, there is an end of the chase for that time. Indeed, when life is pursued, and in danger, whoever values it, should give up every thing but his honour to preserve it. And when a discarded minister is prosecuted for having damaged the commonwealth, let him but throw down some of the fruits of his iniquity to the hunters, and one may engage for his coming off, in other respects, with a whole skin.

FABLE XX

THE CAT AND THE FOX

As the Cat and the Fox were talking politics together, on a time, in the middle of a forest, Reynard said, 'Let things turn out ever so bad, he did not care, for he had a thousand tricks for them yet, before they should hurt him.' – 'But pray,' says he, 'Mrs. Puss, suppose there should be an invasion, what course do you design to take?' – 'Nay,' says the Cat, 'I have but one shift for it, and if that won't do, I am undone.' – 'I am sorry for you, replies Reynard, 'with all my heart, and would gladly furnish you with one or two of mine, but indeed, neighbour, as times go, it is not good to trust; we must even be every one for himself, as the saying is, and so your humble servant.' These words were scarce out of his mouth, when they were alarmed with a pack of hounds, that came upon them full cry. The Cat, by the help of her single shift, ran up a tree, and sat securely among the top branches; from whence she beheld Reynard, who had not been able to get out of sight, overtaken with his thousand tricks, and torn in as many pieces by the dogs which had surrounded him.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.