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Thomas Frognall Dibdin
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PART I.

The Evening Walk.

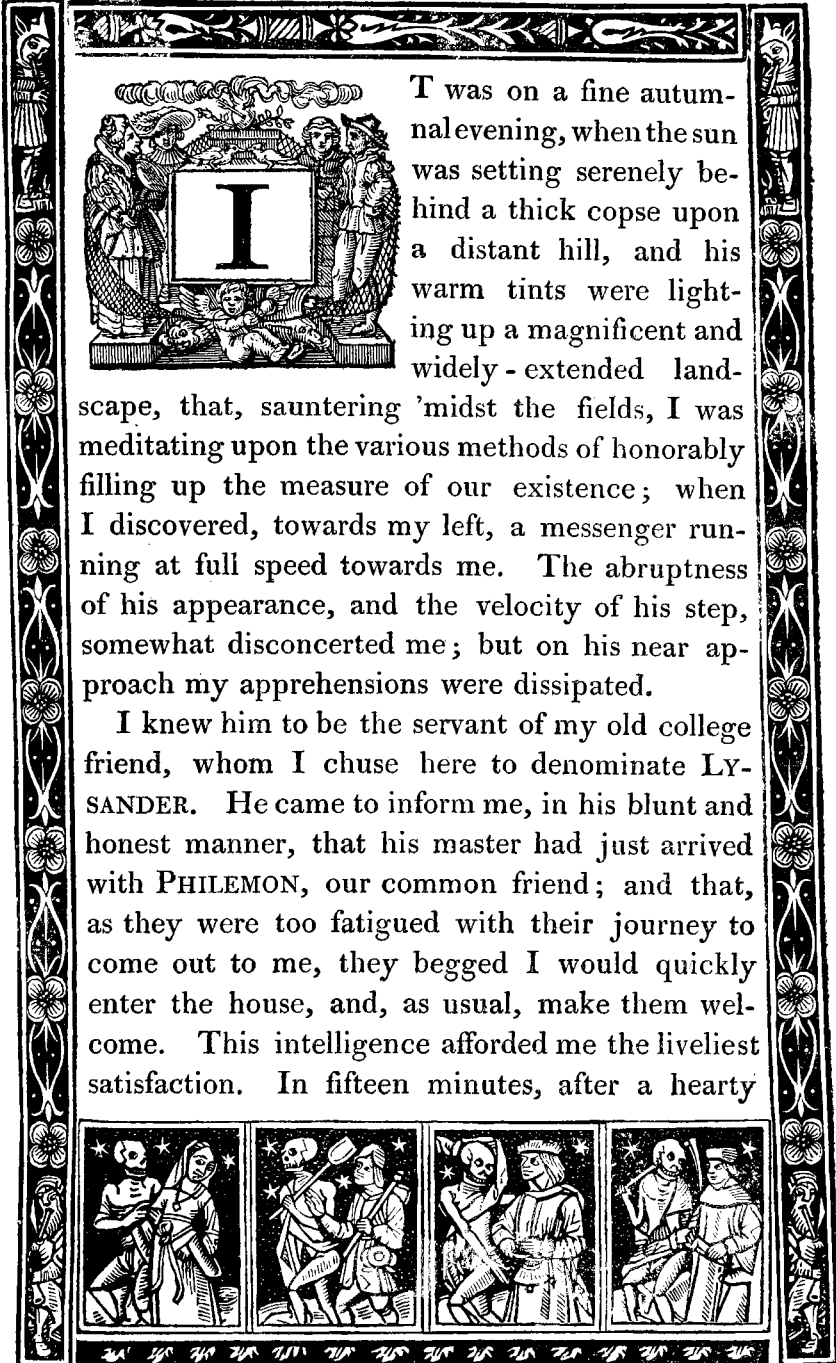
ON THE RIGHT USES OF LITERATURE.



Rede well thyselfe that other folke can't rede.

CHAUCER'S *Good Counsaill*.

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shaking of hands, I was seated with them in the parlour; all of us admiring the unusual splendor of the evening sky, and, in consequence, partaking of the common topics of conversation with a greater flow of spirits.

‘You are come, my friends,’ said I, (in the course of conversation) ‘to make some stay with me—in deed, I cannot suffer you to depart without keeping you at least a week; in order, amongst other things, to view the beauty of our neighbour Lorenzo’s grounds, the general splendor of his house, and the magnificence of his LIBRARY.’ ‘In regard to grounds and furniture,’ replied Lysander, ‘there is very little, in the most beautiful and costly, which can long excite my attention—but the LIBRARY—.’ ‘Here,’ exclaimed Philemon, ‘here you have him in the toils.’ ‘I will frankly confess,’ rejoined Lysander, ‘that I am an arrant BIBLIOMANIAC—that I love books dearly—that the very sight, touch, and, more, the perusal’—‘Hold, my friend,’ again exclaimed Philemon, ‘you have renounced your profession—you talk of *reading* books—do BIBLIOMANIACS ever *read* books?’ ‘Nay,’ quoth Lysander, ‘you shall not banter thus with impunity. We will, if it please you,’ said he, [turning round to me] ‘make our abode with you for a few days—and, after seeing the library of your neighbour, I will throw down the gauntlet to Philemon, challenging him to answer certain questions which you may put to us, respecting the number, rarity, beauty, or utility of those works

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which relate to the literature and antiquities of our own country. We shall then see who is able to return the readiest answer.' 'Forgive,' rejoined Philemon, 'my bantering strain. I revoke my speech. You know that, with yourself, I heartily love books; more from their contents than their appearance.' Lysander returned a gracious smile; and the hectic of irritability on his cheek was dissipated in an instant.

The approach of evening made us think of settling our plans. My friends begged their horses might be turned into the field; and that, while they stayed with me, the most simple fare and the plainest accommodation might be their lot. They knew how little able I was to treat them as they were wont to be treated; and, therefore, taking 'the will for the deed,' they resolved to be as happy as an humble roof could make them.

While the cloth was laying for supper [for I should add, that we dine at three and sup at nine] we took a stroll in my small garden, which has a mound at the bottom, shaded with lilacs and laburnums, that overlooks a pretty range of meadows, terminated by the village church. The moon had now gained a considerable ascendancy in the sky; and the silvery paleness and profound quiet of the surrounding landscape, which, but an hour ago, had been enlivened by the sun's last rays, seemed to affect the minds of us all very sensibly. Lysander, in particular, began to express the sentiments which such a scene excited in him.—'Yonder,' says he,

[pointing to the church-yard] ‘ is the bourn which terminates our earthly labors ; and I marvel much how mortals can spend their time in cavilling at each other—in murdering, with their pens as well as their swords, all that is excellent and admirable in human nature—instead of curbing their passions, elevating their hopes, and tranquillizing their fears. Every evening, for at least one-third of the year, heaven has fixed in the sky yonder visible monitor to man. Calmness and splendor are her attendants : no dark passions, no carking cares, neither spleen nor jealousy seem to dwell in that bright orb, where, as has been fondly imagined, ‘ the wretched may have rest.’—‘And here,’ replied Philemon, ‘ we do nothing but fret and fume if our fancied merits are not instantly rewarded, or if another wear a sprig of laurel more verdant than ourselves ! I could mention, within my own recollection, an hundred instances of this degrading prostitution of talent—aye, a thousand.’—‘ Gently reprimand your fellow creatures,’ resumed Lysander, ‘ lest you commit an error as great as any of those which you condemn in others. The most difficult of human tasks seems to be the exercise of forbearance and temperance. By exasperating, you only rekindle, and not extinguish, the evil sparks in our dispositions. A man will bear being told he is in the wrong ; but you must tell him so gently and mildly. Animosity, petulance, and persecution, are the plagues which destroy our better parts.’—‘ And envy,’ rejoined Philemon, ‘ has surely enough to do.’—‘ Yes,’

said Lysander, ‘ we might enumerate, as you were about to do, many instances—and [what you were not about to do] pity while we enumerate! I think,’ continued he, addressing himself particularly to me, ‘ I think you informed me that the husband of poor Lavinia lies buried in yonder church-yard; and perhaps the very tomb, which now glistens by the moon-beam, is the one which consecrates his memory! That man was passionately addicted to literature;—he had a strong mind; a wonderful grasp of intellect; but his love of paradox and hypothesis quite ruined his faculties. NICAS happened to discover some glaring errors in his last treatise, and the poor man grew sick at heart in consequence. Nothing short of *infallibility* and *invincibility* satisfied him; and, like the Spaniard in the ‘ Diable Boiteux,’ who went mad because five of his countrymen had been beaten by fifty Portuguese, this unhappy creature lost all patience and forbearance, because, in an hundred systems which he had built with the cards of fancy, ninety-nine happened to tumble to the ground.

‘ This is the dangerous consequence, not so much of vanity and self-love but, of downright literary Quixotism. A man may be cured of vanity as the French nobleman was—‘ Ecoutez messieurs! Monseigneur le Duc va dire la meilleure chose du monde!’* but for this raving ungovernable passion of soaring beyond all human comprehension, I fear

* This is the substance of the story related in Darwin’s *Zoonomia*; vol. iv. p. 81.

there is no cure but in such a place as the one which is now before us. Compared with this, how different was MENANDER'S case! Careless himself about examining and quoting authorities with punctilious accuracy, and trusting too frequently to the *ipse-dixits* of good friends:—with a quick discernment—a sparkling fancy—great store of classical knowledge, and a never ceasing play of colloquial wit, he moved right onwards in his manly course: the delight of the gay, and the admiration of the learned! He wrote much and variously: but in an evil hour the demon malice caught him abroad—watched his deviations—noted down his failings—and, discovering his vulnerable part, he did not fail, like another Paris, to profit by the discovery. Menander became the victim of over-refined sensibility: he need not have feared the demon, as no good man need fear Satan. His pen ceased to convey his sentiments: he sickened at heart: and after his body had been covered by the green grass turf, the gentle elves of fairy-land took care to weave a chaplet to hang upon his tomb, which was never to know decay!

‘SYCORAX was this demon; and a cunning and clever demon was he!’ ‘I am at a loss,’ said Philemon, ‘to comprehend exactly what you mean?’ ‘I will cease speaking metaphorically,’ replied Lysander; ‘but Sycorax was a man of ability in his way. He taught literary men, in some measure, the value of careful research and faithful quotation; in other words, he taught them to speak

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the truth as they found her; and, doubtless, for this he merits not the name of demon, unless you allow me the privilege of a Grecian.* That Sycoxax loved truth must be admitted; but that he loved no one else so much as himself to speak the truth, must also be admitted. Nor had he, after all, any grand notions of the goddess. She was, in his sight, rather of diminutive than gigantic growth: rather of a tame than towering mien: dressed out in little trinkets, and formally arrayed in the faded point lace and elevated toupee of the ancient English school, and not in the flowing and graceful robes of Grecian simplicity. But his malice and ill-nature were frightful; and withal, his love of scurrility and abuse quite intolerable. He mistook, in too many instances, the manner for the matter; the shadow for the substance. He passed his criticisms, and dealt out his invectives with so little ceremony, and so much venom, that he seemed born with a scalping knife in his hand, to commit murder as long as he lived! To him, censure was sweeter than praise; and the more elevated the rank, and respectable the character of his antagonist, the more dexterously he aimed his blows, and the more frequently he renewed his attacks. In consequence, scarcely one beautiful period, one passionate sentiment of the higher or-

* Without turning over the ponderous tomes of Stephen, Constantine, and Scaliger, consult the sensible remarks upon the word 'Δαίμων' in Parkhurst's *Greek and English Lexicon to the New Testament*, 8vo edit. 1798. In the Greek language, it is equally applied to an accomplished and unprincipled character. Homer alone will furnish an hundred instances of this.

der, one elevated thought, or philosophical deduction, marked his numerous writings. ‘No garden-flower grew wild’ in the narrow field of his imagination; and although the words decency and chastity were continually dropping from his lips, I suspect that the reverse of these qualities were always settled round his heart.* Thus you see, my dear Philemon, (concluded Lysander,) that the love of paradox, of carelessness, and of malice, are equally destructive of that true substantial fame which, as connected with literature, a wise and an honest man would wish to establish. But come; the dews of evening begin to fall chilly; let us seek the house of our friend.’

As Lysander concluded his discourse, we turned abruptly, but thoughtfully, towards my cottage; and making the last circuit of the gravel walk, Philemon stopped to listen to the song of a passing rustic, who seemed to be uttering all the joy which sometimes strongly seizes a simple heart. ‘I would rather,’ exclaimed he, ‘be this poor fellow, chanting his ‘native wood-notes wild,’ if his heart know not guilt—than the shrewdest critic in the universe, who could neither feel, nor write, good-naturedly!’ We smiled at this ejaculation; and quickly reached the house.

* Mark certain expressions, gentle reader, which occur in the notes to the life of *Robin Hood*, prefixed to the ballads which go under his name: 1795, 2 vols. 8vo.—also a Dissertation on Romance and Minstrelsy in the first vol. of *Ancient Metrical Romances*, 1802, 3 vols. 8vo. A very common degree of shrewdness, and of acquaintance with English literature, will shew that, in Menander and Sycorax are described honest TOM WARTON and snarling ‘mister’ JOSEPH RITSON!

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The fatigue of travelling had sharpened the appetites of my friends; and at a moment when, as the inimitable Cowper expresses it,

our drawing-rooms begin to blaze
 With lights, by clear reflection multiplied
 From many a mirror, in which he of Gath,
 Goliath, might have seen his giant bulk
 Whole without stooping, towering crest and all,
 Our pleasures too began :

Task, b. iv.

but they were something more rational than those of merely eating and drinking. ‘I seldom partake of this meal,’ observed Philemon, ‘without thinking of the *omnium-gatherum* bowl, so exquisitely described by old Isaac Walton. We want here, it is true, the ‘sweet shady arbour—the contexture of woodbines, sweet-briar, jessamine, and myrtle,’* and the time of the evening prevents our enjoying it without; but, in lieu of all this, we have the sight of books, of busts, and of pictures. I see there the ponderous folio chronicles, the genuine quarto romances, and, a little above, a glittering row of thin, closely-squeezed, curiously-gilt, volumes of original plays. As we have finished our supper, let us——’ ‘My friends, (observed I,) not a finger upon a book to-night—to-morrow you may ransack at your pleasure. I wish to pursue

* *Complete Angler*, p. 335. Bagster's edit. 1808. In a similar style of description are “the faire grove and swete walkes, letticed and gardened on both sides” of Mr. Warde's letter—describing the nunnery of Little Gidding in Huntingdonshire. See Hearne's edit. of *Peter Langtoft's Chronicle*, vol. 1, p. cx.