

OF CURIOSITY, OR AN OVER-BUSY INQUISITIVENESS  
INTO THINGS IMPERTINENT.

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1. IF a dwelling-house, by reason of its ill situation or contrivance, be not commodiously light and airy, or too much exposed to ill weather and unhealthy, it is most advisable entirely to quit such a habitation, unless perhaps, through continuance of time, neighborhood of friends, or any other endearing circumstance, a man should become much wedded to the place; in which case it may be possible, by the alteration of windows and new placing of doors and staircases, either to remove or to lessen these inconveniences. By such like remedies, even whole cities have been much amended and improved both as to health and pleasantness; and it is said of the place of my nativity particularly, that, while it once lay open to the western winds, and to the beams of the declining sun streaming over the top of Parnassus, it was by Chaeron turned toward the east; but it is thought that Empedocles the naturalist secured that whole region round about from the pestilence, by closing up the rift of a certain mountain, from whence a contagious southerly damp breathed forth upon the flat of that country. And now, since there are several noxious qualities and distempered passions that lurk within the body too, which is the more immediate habitation of the soul, — and which, like the dark and tempestuous weather that is without, do cloud and disturb it, — therefore the like method which has been observed in curing the defects and annoy-

ances of an ill-contrived and unhealthy dwelling may be followed here, in rendering the body a more commodious, serviceable, and delightful mansion for the soul. Wherein that it may enjoy its desired calmness and serenity, it will conduce beyond all other expedients whatsoever, that those blind, tumultuous, and extravagant passions should be expelled or extinguished utterly; or, if that cannot be, yet that they be so far reduced and moderated, and so prudently applied and accommodated to their proper objects, that the mischief and disorder of them (at least) may be removed.

Among these may deservedly be accounted that sort of curiosity, which, by its studious prying into the evils of mankind, seems to be a distemper of envy and ill-nature.

Why envious wretch, with such a piercing ray,  
Blind to thine own, dost others' faults survey?

If the knowledge of ill can reward the industrious search with so much delight and pleasure, turn the point of thy curiosity upon thyself and thine own affairs, and thou shalt within doors find matter enough for the most laborious enquiries, plentiful as

Water in Aliso's stream, or leaves about the oak.

So vast a heap of offences shalt thou find in thy own conversation, such variety of perturbations in thy soul, and manifold failures in thy duty. To take a distinct and orderly survey of all which, that of Xenophon will be good direction, who said, that it was the manner of discreet housekeepers to place their weapons of war, utensils for the kitchen, instruments of husbandry, and furniture for religious and sacred services, each in several and proper repositories. So every man that would make an exact enquiry into and take a just account of himself, should first make a particular search into the several mischiefs that proceed from each passion within him, whether it be envy or jealousy, covetousness or cowardice, or any other vicious

inclination ; and then distribute and range them all (as it were) into distinct apartments.

This done, make thy reviews upon them with the most accurate inspection, so that nothing may divert thee from the severest scrutiny ; obstruct every prospect that looks towards thy neighbors' quarters, and close up all those avenues which may lead thee to any foreign curiosity ; become an eavesdropper to thine own house, listen to the whispers of thine own walls, and observe those secret arts of the female closet, the close intrigues of the parlor, and the treacherous practices of thy servants, which thy own windows will discover to thee. Here this inquisitive and busy disposition may find an employment that will be of use and advantage, and is neither ill-natured nor impertinent ; while every man shall call himself to this strict examination :

Where have I err'd ? What have I said, or done ?  
What duty, when, and how have I foregone ?

2. But now, as the poets feign concerning Lamia, that upon her going to bed she lays aside her eyes among the attirements of her dressing-box, and is at home for the most part blind and drowsy too, and puts on her eyes only when she goes abroad a gadding ; so it is with most men, who, through a kind of an affected ignorance and artificial blindness, commonly blunder and stumble at their own threshold, are the greatest strangers to their own personal defects, and of all others least familiarly acquainted with their own domestic ills and follies. But when they look abroad, their sight is sharpened with all the watchful and laborious curiosity imaginable, which serves as deforming spectacles to an evil eye, that is already envenomed by the malignity of a worse nature.

And hence it is, that a person of this busy meddling disposition is a greater friend to them he hates than to himself ; for overlooking his own concerns, through his

being so heedfully intent on those of other men, he re-proves and exposes their miscarriages, admonishes them of the errors and follies they ought to correct, and affrights them into greater caution for the future; so that not only the careless and unwary, but even the more sober and prudent persons, may gain no small advantage from the impertinence and ill-nature of inquisitive people.

It was a remarkable instance of the prudence of Ulysses, that, going into the regions of departed souls, he would not exchange so much as one word with his mother there till he had first obtained an answer from the oracle and despatched the business he came about; and then, turning to her, he afforded some small time for a few impertinent questions about the other women upon the place, asking which was Tyro, and which the fair Chloris, and concerning the unfortunate Epicasta, why,

Noosed to a lofty beam, she would suspended die.\*

But we through extreme sloth and ignorance, being stupidly careless of our own affairs, must be idly spending our time and talk either about our neighbor's pedigree, how that such a one had a tapster for his grandfather, and that his grandmother was a laundress; or that another owes three or four talents, and is not able to pay the interest. Nay, and such trivial stuff as this we busy ourselves about, — where such a man's wife has been all this while; and what it was, that this and the other fellow have been talking of in a corner. But the wise Socrates employed his curiosity to better purpose, when he went about enquiring by what excellent precepts Pythagoras obtained so great authority among his followers; and Aristippus, meeting Ischomachus at the Olympic games, asked him what those notions were with which Socrates had so powerfully charmed the minds of his young scholars;

\* *Odyss.* XI. 278.

upon the slight information whereof, he was so passionately inflamed with a desire of going to Athens, that he grew pale and lean, and almost languished till he came to drink of the fountain itself, and had been acquainted with the person of Socrates, and more fully learned that philosophy of his, the design of which was to teach men how to discover their own ills and apply proper remedies to them.

3. But to some sort of men their own life and actions would appear the most unpleasant spectacle in the world, and therefore they fly from the light of their conscience, and cannot bear the torture of one reflecting thought upon themselves; for when the soul, being once defiled with all manner of wickedness, is scared at its own hideous deformity, it endeavors to run from itself, and ranging here and there, it pampers its own malignity with malicious speculations on the ills of others.

It is observed of the hen that, loathing the plenty of meat that is cast before her on a clean floor, she will be scratching in a hole or spurning the dunghill, in search of one single musty grain. So these over-busy people, neglecting such obvious and common things into which any man may enquire and talk of without offence, cannot be satisfied unless they rake into the private and concealed evils of every family in the neighborhood. It was smartly said by the Egyptian, who, being asked what it was he carried so closely, replied, it was therefore covered that it might be secret. Which answer will serve to check the curiosity of those impertinent men who will be always peeping into the privacies of others; for assuredly there is nothing usually more concealed than what is too foul to be seen; nor would it be kept so close, were it either fit or safe it should be known. Without knocking at the door, it is great rudeness to enter another's house, and therefore in former times were rappers fitted to the

gates, that by the noise thereof notice might be given to the family; for the same purpose are porters appointed now, lest, a stranger coming in unawares, the mistress or daughter of the family might be surprised busy or undressed, or a servant be seen under correction, or the maids be overheard in the heat of their scolding. But a person of this prying busy temper, who would disdain the being invited to a sober and well-governed house, will yet even forcibly intrude himself as a spy into the indecencies of private families; and he pries into those very things which locks, bolts, and doors were intended to secure from common view, for no other end but to discover them to all the world. Aristo said that those winds were the most troublesome which blew up one's garments and exposed one's nakedness; but these inquisitive people deprive us of all the shelter or security of walls and doors, and like the wanton air, which pervades the veil and steals through the closest guards of virgin modesty, they insinuate into those divertisements which are hidden in the retirements of the night, and strip men even to their very skin.

4. So that — as it is merrily said by the comedian concerning Cleon, that “his hands were in Aetolia, and his soul in Thieftown” \* — the hands and feet, eyes and thoughts of inquisitive persons are straggling about in many places at once. Neither the mansions of the great, nor the cottages of the poor, nor the privy chambers of princes, nor the recesses of the nuptial alcove, can escape the search of their curiosity; they are familiar to the affairs of strangers, and will be prying into the darkest mysteries of state, although it be to the manifest peril of their being ruined by it. For as to him that will be curiously examining the virtues of medicinal herbs, the unwary taste of a venomous plant conveys a deleterious impression upon the brain, before its noxious quality can be dis-

\* Aristophanes, Knights, 79.

cerned by the palate; so they that boldly pry into the ills of great persons usually meet with their own destruction, sooner than they can discover the dangerous secret they enquire after. And so it happens that, when the rashly curious eye, not contented to expatiate in the free and boundless region of reflected light, will be gazing at the imperial seat of brightness, it becomes a sacrifice to the burning rays, and straight sinks down in penal darkness.

It was therefore well said by Philippides the comedian, who, being asked by King Lysimachus what he desired might be imparted to him, replied, Any thing but a secret. And indeed, those things in the courts of princes that are most pleasant in themselves and most delightful to be known, — such as balls, magnificent entertainments, and all the shows of pomp and greatness, — are exposed to common view, nor do they ever hide those divertisements and enjoyments which are the attendants of a prosperous estate; but in what cases soever they seem reserved, — as when they are conceiving some high displeasure, or contriving the methods of a revenge, or raging under a fit of jealousy, or suspicious of the disloyal practices of their children, or dubious concerning the treachery of a favorite, — come not near nor intermeddle, for every thing is of a dreadful aspect and of very dangerous access that is thus concealed. Fly from so black a cloud, whose darkness condenses into a tempest; and it will be time enough, when its fury breaks forth with flash and thunder, for thee to observe upon whose head the mischief falls.

5. But to avoid the danger of this curiosity, divert thy thoughts to more safe and delightful enquiries; survey the wonders of nature in the heavens, earth, the sea, and air; in which thou hast a copious choice of materials for the more sublime, as well as the more easy and obvious contemplations. If thy more piercing wit aspires to the noblest enquiries, consider the greater luminary in its

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