

THE ESSAYIST.

FOR THE NEW-YORK MIRROR.

SENSIBILITY.

OF all the virtues that adorn and dignify the human mind, perhaps there is not one that is more agreeable in practice, and more beautiful in contemplation, than sensibility; at the same time, there is not one whose counterfeit or affectation is more disgusting. That the imitation is so common, may be ascribed to the acknowledged excellence of the original virtue; but if the imitators could but see for a moment with the eyes of their observers, they would perceive the unfavourable impression it leaves. That instead of being regarded as the evidence of a benevolent feeling, it is looked upon as the offspring of a weak and foppish mind, exposed to the pity or ridicule of those that behold, as kindness or knowledge may predominate in them. To give to sensibility all the dignity that is naturally its own, it must be useful, or at least it must arise from such objects as would make it useful if some accidental circumstance did not intervene. Our tears must not flow from the loss of a kitten, or a singing bird, or a lap dog; nor at the misfortunes of a character of fiction, who is so entwined with our sympathies that we are compelled to feel as he feels, and suffer as he suffers. We must not faint if an acquaintance has cut his finger, or a favourite play-actor is suddenly indisposed, or the perforation for an ear-ring has swelled unusually; nor must we die if the object of our purest, tenderest love, proves insensate. In cases like these, grief shows a tenderness of heart that is unexceptionable indeed, but as the objects are inadequate, it is an unworthy attribute of a being endowed as man is endowed. Why should we place such an inordinate value upon such trifles, or mourn their loss with a grief so unsuited to them? In this world of wo there certainly are objects enough of real distress, where the commiserations of the humane would be a salutary balm to the wounded spirit, whose griefs would otherwise be insupportable. And how soothing to the unfortunate are the expressions of true sympathy! How consoling the reflection, that, bereaved of health, friends, liberty, property, or happiness, there are some beings in the world who will sympathise in our misfortunes, appreciate their severity and extent, mourn when we weep, and bear with our peevishness patiently,

out of respect to the sources which gave rise to it. And what a lustre does it create around the face of beauty, and what a friendly veil does it interpose for deformity, to behold them engaged in the angel's employments of consoling the afflicted! The eye of ugliness, when lighted by the glow of feeling, sends forth a brighter beam than ever shot from the glances of unimpassioned beauty; and words of kindness are a greater ornament to the face than the fairest complexion, or the most regular set of features. This amiable virtue is naturally the tenant of the female bosom. Man sometimes possesses it, but it is *always expected* in woman, and her character is very defective without it. It is one of those mild and tender qualities which distinguish her from the other sex, whose practice is her peculiar province, and whose absence occasions a very perceptible blank where all should be perfect. For this reason the woman who coldly repulses the *vagranti* who begs at her door for bread, acts unnaturally. Perhaps her judgment tells her that to encourage idleness, by bestowing the boon that is requested, is injudicious; but if, in compliance with her judgment, she refuses the petition, she violates the tenderness of the female heart. I once saw a lady elevate her hands and eyes with a most pathetic exclamation, over the story of a shipwrecked mariner, who had nearly perished with hunger; but I have always suspected the compassion of that lady, because almost, at the same moment, I saw her coldly reject the application of an infirm old creature who besought her for a pittance, out of her profusion, to satisfy his wants. Man is made of sterner stuff, and to him should be committed the task of reforming such evils as these.

Very many persons, who move in the middle, or higher ranks of life, see very few of those scenes of misery that abound amongst the poor; consequently they are quite ignorant of them. However, it is not to be supposed, that even they are entirely unacquainted with the existence and nature of such scenes.

It is not necessary, nor is it our purpose to enumerate any particular objects to arouse the feelings of the heart. One extract, however, I beg leave to quote, which depicts a scene of wretchedness, of a nature that we can know nothing of by observation. It is an account of some poor persons who had left Germany for Holland, with the intention of emigrating to America, but who found no means of defraying the expenses of a voyage across the Atlantic, and were obliged to return:

"Many, unwilling to admit the necessity of returning, remained still in the neighbourhood of the Dutch cities till the approach of winter. At last, violently undecieved, they set out on their return. Half starved, covered with rags, *****—and from the total prostration and wasting of strength, scarce able to creep on, they arrived in the neighbourhood of Dusseldorf. And yet it was out of the question to afford the most miserable any repose, for it was necessary to hurry them forward, to make room for those that followed. Those who could not march, were sent on in wagons. Almost every family had lost one of its members. An unhappy father of seven children, of whom the oldest was scarce twelve years, had become insane at the loss of his wife. 'I want nothing,' was his constant cry, in his delirium. 'I want nothing but a little bread for my poor children. One loaf—yes, one loaf—I have only earned one—but the poor worms cannot get their fill of that, and leave some for me to eat, and be strong enough to work to-morrow for another. See! look there!—Three dogs!—See how they eat!—O how they eat their fill!—O God!—O God! let my poor children only eat their fill once!—Shall we go to America! Oh, yes, to America—there, there is plenty of land—all belongs to God—there I shall

have a field—and there we'll raise corn and potatoes, and eat as much as we want.'"

Scenes of wretchedness, like this, are not of a romantic kind; but while they *do* exist, a blot upon the humanity of the world, there is nothing that ought to prevent our dwelling upon them. Moreover, it might be instrumental in correcting that false and sickly taste, which the refinements of the present age are apt to create—a disposition to dissolve in grief, over a fancied, or at least a trifling ill, while real distress, like that that has just been mentioned, would be considered too low and vulgar to receive a moment's thought. Strange as it may appear, things like these are not tolerated, unless it be from the pulpit. The preacher is licensed to give us what advice he pleases, but so despotic is the empire of *fashion*, that very few have the temerity to be serious, except in a church—in conversation it is entirely out of the question. I remember having once read of a lady whose daughter (a young woman, who delighted in cards and romances) lay at the point of death. In reply to a divine who wished to speak a few words to the dying person, the mother said, "let her alone, she is now engaged with her cards, and novels, and is happy—she has but a short time to live, and she must not be interrupted while occupied by her favourite pastime." There is as much justice in the ideas of that mother as there is in the false delicacy that would prevent the young's contemplating the real ills of life from an apprehension of making them melancholy.

W.