

CHARACTERISTICS:

IN THE

MANNER OF ROCHEFOUCAULT'S MAXIMS.

By
William Hazlitt.

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PREFACE.

THE following work was suggested by a perusal of Rochefoucault's MAXIMS AND MORAL REFLECTIONS. I was so struck with the force and beauty of the style and matter, that I felt an earnest ambition to embody some occasional thoughts of my own in the same form. This was much easier than to retain an equal degree of spirit. Having, however, succeeded indifferently in a few, the work grew under my hands; and both the novelty and agreeableness of the task impelled me forward. There is a peculiar *stimulus*, and at the same time a freedom from all anxiety, in this mode of writing.

A thought must tell at once, or not at all. There is no opportunity for considering how we shall make out an opinion by labour and prolixity. An observation must be self-evident; or a reason or illustration (if we give one) must be pithy and concise. Each MAXIM should contain the essence or ground-work of a separate Essay, but so developed as of itself to suggest a whole train of reflections to the reader; and it is equally necessary to avoid paradox or commonplace. The style also must be sententious and epigrammatic, with a certain pointedness and involution of expression, so as to keep the thoughts distinct, and to prevent them from running endlessly into one another. Such are the conditions, to which it seemed to me necessary to conform, in order to insure any thing like success to a work of this kind; or to render the pleasure of the perusal equal to the difficulty of the execution.

PREFACE.

vii

There is only one point in which I dare even allude to a comparison with Rochefoucault—*I have had no theory to maintain*; and have endeavoured to set down each thought as it occurred to me, without bias or prejudice of any sort.

There is only one point in which I dare
 even allude to a comparison with Locke
 himself - I have had an liberty to write
 you; and have endeavored to set down
 each thought as it occurred to me, with
 your view of particularity only.

It is not my intention to give you
 a full and complete account of the
 history of the subject, but to give you
 a general idea of the progress of the
 mind in the study of the subject.

The first part of the work is devoted
 to a general survey of the subject, and
 to a discussion of the various theories
 which have been advanced on the subject.

The second part of the work is devoted
 to a detailed examination of the
 various theories which have been
 advanced on the subject.

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CHARACTERISTICS.

I.

OF all virtues, magnanimity is the rarest. There are a hundred persons of merit for one who willingly acknowledges it in another.

II.

It is often harder to praise a friend than an enemy. By the last we may acquire a reputation for candour; by the first we only seem to discharge a debt, and are liable to a suspicion of partiality. Besides, though familiarity may not breed contempt, it takes off the edge of admiration; and the shining points of character are not those we chiefly wish to dwell upon. Our habitual impression of any one is very different from the light in which he would choose to appear before the public. We think of him *as a friend*: we must forget that he is one, before we can extol him to others.

B

III.

To speak highly of one with whom we are intimate, is a species of egotism. Our modesty as well as our jealousy teaches us caution on this subject.

IV.

What makes it so difficult to do justice to others is, that we are hardly sensible of merit, unless it falls in with our own views and line of pursuit; and where this is the case, it interferes with our own pretensions. To be forward to praise others, implies either great eminence, that can afford to part with applause; or great quickness of discernment, with confidence in our own judgments; or great sincerity and love of truth, getting the better of our self-love.

V.

Many persons are so narrow in this respect, that they cannot bring themselves to allow the most trifling merit in any one else. This is not altogether ill-nature, but a meanness of spirit or want of confidence in themselves, which is upset and kicks the beam, if the smallest particle of praise is thrown into another's scale. They are poor feeble insects tottering along

the road to fame, that are crushed by the shadow of opposition, or stopped by a whisper of rivalry.

VI.

There are persons, not only whose praise, but whose very names we cannot bear to hear.

VII.

There are people who cannot praise a friend for the life of them. With every effort and all the goodwill in the world, they shrink from the task through a want of mental courage; as some people shudder at plunging into a cold-bath from weak nerves.

VIII.

Others praise you behind your back, who will not, on any account, do so to your face. Is it that they are afraid of being taken for flatterers? Or that they had rather any one else should know they think well of you than yourself; as a rival is the last person we should wish to hear the favourable opinion of a mistress, because it gives him most pleasure?

IX.

To deny undoubted merit in others, is to deny

its existence altogether, and consequently our own. The example of illiberality we set is easily turned against ourselves.

X.

Magnanimity is often concealed under an appearance of shyness, and even poverty of spirit. Heroes, according to Rousseau, are not known by the loftiness of their carriage; as the greatest braggarts are generally the merest cowards.

XI.

Men of the greatest genius are not always the most prodigal of their encomiums. But then it is when their range of power is confined, and they have in fact little perception, except of their own particular kind of excellence.

XII.

Popularity disarms envy in well-disposed minds. Those are ever the most ready to do justice to others, who feel that the world has done them justice. When success has not this effect in opening the mind, it is a sign that it has been ill-deserved.

XIII.

Some people tell us all the harm—others as carefully conceal all the good they hear of us.

XIV.

It signifies little what we say of our acquaintance, so that we do not tell them what others say against them. Tale-bearers make all the real mischief.

XV.

The silence of a friend commonly amounts to treachery. His not daring to say any thing in our behalf implies a tacit censure.

XVI.

It is hard to praise those who are dispraised by others. He is little short of a hero, who perseveres in thinking well of a friend who has become a butt for slander, and a bye-word.

XVII.

However we may flatter ourselves to the contrary, our friends think no higher of us than the world do. They see us with the jaundiced or distrustful eyes of others. They may know

better, but their feelings are governed by popular prejudice. Nay, they are more shy of us (when under a cloud) than even strangers; for we involve them in a common disgrace, or compel them to embroil themselves in continual quarrels and disputes in our defence.

XVIII.

We find those who are officious and troublesome through sheer imbecility of character. They can neither resolve to do a thing, nor to let it alone; and by getting in the way, hinder where perhaps they meant to help. To *volunteer* a service and shrink from the performance, is to prevent others from undertaking it.

XIX.

Envy, among other ingredients, has a mixture of the love of justice in it. We are more angry at undeserved than at deserved good-fortune.

XX.

We admit the merit of some, much less willingly than that of others. This is because there is something about them, that is at vari-

ance with their boasted pretensions, either a heaviness importing stupidity, or a levity inferring folly, &c.

XXI.

The assumption of merit is easier, less embarrassing, and more effectual than the positive attainment of it.

XXII.

Envy is the most universal passion. We only pride ourselves on the qualities we possess or think we possess; but we envy the pretensions we have, and those which we have not, and do not even wish for. We envy the greatest qualities and every trifling advantage. We envy the most ridiculous appearance or affectation of superiority. We envy folly and conceit: nay, we go so far as to envy whatever confers distinction or notoriety, even vice and infamy.

XXIII.

Envy is a littleness of soul, which cannot see beyond a certain point, and if it does not occupy the whole space, feels itself excluded.

XXIV.

Or, it often arises from weakness of judgment. We cannot make up our minds to admit the soundness of certain pretensions; and therefore hate the appearance, where we are doubtful about the reality. We consider every such tax on our applause as a kind of imposition or injustice; so that the withholding our assent is from a fear of being tricked out of our good opinion under false pretences. This is the reason why sudden or upstart advantages are always an object of such extreme jealousy, and even of contempt; and why we so readily bow to the claims of posthumous and long-established reputation. The last is the sterling coin of merit, which we no longer question or cavil at. The other, we think, may be tinsel; and we are unwilling to give our admiration in exchange for a bauble. It is not that the candidates for it in the one case are removed out of our way, and make a diversion to the more immediate claims of our cotemporaries; but that their own are so clear and universally acknowledged, that they come home to our feelings and bosoms with their full weight, without any drawbacks of doubt in our

own minds, or objection on the part of others. If our envy were intrinsically and merely a hatred of excellence and of the approbation due to it, we should hate it the more, the more distinguished and unequivocal it was. On the other hand, our faith in standard reputation is a kind of religion; and our admiration of it, instead of a cold, servile offering, an enthusiastic homage. There are people who would attempt to persuade us that we read Homer or Milton with pleasure, only to *spite* some living poet. With them, all our best actions are hypocrisy; and our best feelings, affectation.

XXV.

The secret of our self-love is just the same as that of our liberality and candour. We prefer ourselves to others, only because we have a more intimate consciousness and confirmed opinion of our own claims and merits than of any other person's.

XXVI.

It argues a poor opinion of ourselves, when we cannot admit any other class of merit besides our own, or any rival in that class.

XXVII.

Those who are the most distrustful of themselves, are the most envious of others; as the most weak and cowardly are the most revengeful.

XXVIII.

Some persons of great talents and celebrity have been remarkable for narrowness of mind and an impatience of every thing like competition. Garrick and other public favourites might be mentioned as instances. This may perhaps be accounted for, either from an undue and intoxicating share of applause, so that they became jealous of popularity, as of a mistress; or from a want of other resources, so as to be unable to repose on themselves without the constant stimulus of incense offered to their vanity.

XXIX.

We are more jealous of frivolous accomplishments with brilliant success, than of the most estimable qualities without it. Dr. Johnson envied Garrick whom he despised, and ridiculed Goldsmith whom he loved.

XXX.

Persons of slender intellectual *stamina* dread

competition, as dwarfs are afraid of being run over in the street. Yet vanity often prompts them to hazard the experiment, as women through fool-hardiness rush into a crowd.

XXXI.

We envy others for any trifling addition to their acknowledged merit, more than for the sum-total, much as we object to pay an addition to a bill, or grudge an acquaintance an unexpected piece of good fortune. This happens, either because such an accession of accomplishment is like stealing a march upon us, and implies a versatility of talent we had not reckoned upon; or it seems an impertinence and affectation for a man to go out of his way to distinguish himself; or it is because we cannot account for his proficiency mechanically and as a thing of course, by saying, *It is his trade!* In like manner, we plume ourselves most on excelling in what we are not bound to do, and are most flattered by the admission of our most questionable pretensions. We nurse the rickety child, and want to have our faults and weak sides pampered into virtues. We feel little obliged to any one for owning the merit we are

known to have—it is an old story—but we are mightily pleased to be complimented on some fancy we set up for—it is *a feather in our cap*, a new conquest, an extension of our sense of power. A man of talent aspires to a reputation for personal address or advantages. Sir Robert Walpole wished to pass for a man of gallantry, for which he was totally unfit. A woman of sense would be thought a beauty, a beauty a great wit, and so on.

XXXII.

Some there are who can only find out in us those good qualities which nobody else has discovered: as there are others who make a point of crying up our deserts, after all the rest of the world have agreed to do so. The first are patrons, not friends: the last are not friends, but sycophants.

XXXIII.

A distinction has been made between acuteness and subtlety of understanding. This might be illustrated by saying, that acuteness consists in taking up the points or solid atoms, subtlety in feeling the *air* of truth.

XXXIV.

Hope is the best possession. None are completely wretched but those who are without hope; and few are reduced so low as that.

XXXV.

Death is the greatest evil; because it cuts off hope.

XXXVI.

While we desire, we do not enjoy; and with enjoyment desire ceases, which should lend its strongest zest to it. This, however, does not apply to the gratifications of sense, but to the passions, in which distance and difficulty have a principal share.

XXXVII.

To deserve any blessing is to set a just value on it. The pains we take in its pursuit are only a consequence of this.

XXXVIII.

The wish is often "father to the thought:" but we are quite as apt to believe what we dread as what we hope.

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