

MISCELLANEOUS.

ON CONTENTMENT.

BY MRS. J. R. SPOONER.

"The true felicity of life is to be free from perturbations; to understand our duties towards God and man; to enjoy the present without any dependence on the future. Not to amuse ourselves with either hopes or fears, but to rest satisfied with what we have—for he that is so, wants nothing." Seneca.

HAPPY are they who can say with St. Paul, "I have learned in whatsoever state I am therewith to be content." The number, however, of those who are really satisfied with their lot, and whose desires are confined to what they possess, appears to be small. It seems natural for man to look forward, with the expectation of enjoying some future good, rather than to appreciate his present blessings. But our happiness is so intimately connected with a contented mind, that the practise of this disposition becomes a positive duty, which we owe, not only to ourselves, but also to those around us, whose peace and comfort must necessarily, in some degree at least, be influenced by our conduct. Some are by nature more inclined to this temper than others, but the cultivation of it lies in the power of all.

That it forms no mean part of the Christian's duty to be contented under all the dark and mysterious providences that God permits to fall upon him, no one will pretend to deny; yet we occasionally observe that some who bear the name indulge in discontent and repining.

We are but poor judges of what is best for us; and the conviction that our Father in Heaven alone really knows what is so, should cause us readily to acquiesce in his judgments. The experience of many has led them to perceive that circumstances, which they at first considered as highly afflictive, have ultimately proved blessings; and, on the other hand, what seemed to them the joyous fulfilment of many an anxious hope, has at length appeared to exert the most unfavourable influence upon their happiness,—clearly shewing how unfit is shortsighted man to mark out his own destiny, giving him cause to exclaim:

"O happiness! how far we flee
Thine own sweet paths in search of thee."

The history of man plainly shews that a state of interrupted prosperity is not desirable; and God has, in his infinite wisdom and goodness, allotted to every one those trials by which he will be most likely to receive benefit. Few are gifted with sufficient philosophy to desire affliction, and this is not expected of us; yet, when the chastening hand of our Father sends us needful correction, he requires a cheerful submission, which it is incumbent upon us to assume, would we learn that "we are the uses of adversity."

Afflictions, received in a right spirit, have a tendency to improve and rectify the heart and affections, and we should endeavour to meet them with such a frame of mind that we may pass through the furnace like silver purified by the fire.

The principles by which we are impelled to cultivate and practise contentment, do not imply that we are to be so satisfied with our present condition that we ought not to seek to improve it by all laudable means. There is nothing wrong in seeking to add to our worldly advantages in a moderate and proper manner. And in embracing every opportunity of increasing the stores of the mind, we but perform an important duty, which we owe to that nobler part of ourselves, which shall survive its frail tenement of clay throughout the vast ages of eternity.

A disposition of contentment is not like the brilliant and transitory light of a meteor, but may be termed the calm and steady sunshine of the soul,—brightening the aspect of all things around, and teaching us to look at everything on its fairest side; while a contrary spirit—the canker-worm of discontent—imperceptibly wears itself into our natures, causing us to keep our eyes fixed on the dark clouds that occasionally obscure our path, and heedlessly to disregard the many flowers that the kind hand of Providence has yet strown in our way, to cheer and encourage us in pursuing our onward course through life—and occasions us to forget the consoling truth, that, after all, there is more of happiness than of sorrow in the common lot of man, even as the days of sunshine exceed those of gloom. We should consider, under all our trials and afflictions, that we have still much cause for thankfulness—that we are not as much afflicted as we might have been—that our misfortunes are less than those of others, who are perhaps more deserving than ourselves—and that, by indulging in murmuring and repining, we cannot, in the least degree, improve our condition, but only add to our unhappiness. By giving way to a discontented and fretful temper, we are laying the foundation of a

miserable life, & our frame of mind will eventually become such that no blessing will be rightly received and appreciated.

By placing a due value on those means of enjoyment within our reach, and partaking of them with a thankful heart, we are not deterred from the pleasure of looking forward through the bright vista of hope, in the soothing expectation of better days to come. Yet it is not wise to permit the mind to be so fully bent upon happy anticipations of the future, that we place ourselves in danger of incurring the bitter heart sickness of hope long deferred.

Another incentive to the cultivation of contentment, is the consideration that one possessed of this disposition finds enjoyment in the contemplation of the happiness of others, which causes him in part to forget his own cares and vexation; and his gratifications are multiplied by the interest he takes in the pleasures of his friends—which is, indeed, a pure and disinterested source of delight. But to a discontented person, this affords no satisfaction; his state of mind rather disposes him to look with an envious and grudging eye on the prosperity that is denied to him.

Discontent appears to exert an equally prejudicial influence on physical and mental health. Writers on physiology are unanimous on this point. Many are the victims of dyspepsia and hypochondria, who might trace the origin of their sufferings to this cause. With regard to the mind, its tendency is to benumb its faculties, plunge the timid and faint-hearted into slothful inaction, while the reverse gives a pleasing and proper confidence in ourselves, which it is really necessary to possess, would we make our way through the world with respectability. How eloquently does St. Paul speak of the triumphs which this disposition gave him over the evils he endured.—"Troubled on every side, yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed."

The excellent Zollikoffer says, that "Contentment is the happy temper of the man, who, by reason and religion, by reflection and discipline, has learned to control himself, and duly framed himself to his relative position to God, and to external objects,—whose heart is open to all agreeable emotions,—who is satisfied with God, with himself, and with all nature,—enjoys the present with a grateful heart, and promises himself, from the future, more of good than ill. Such a constitution of temper—such a serenity of mind—are certainly the surest means, and the most cogent impulse to virtue and integrity. The duty of contentment does not imply that we are required to assume a stoic indifference to the misfortunes of life. We should indeed claim little merit for bearing what is not felt."

There is an inward satisfaction that the mind enjoys in the consciousness of the right application of its powers, in the cultivation of this disposition. It shews that reason, that noblest attribute of man, exerts her sway over the feelings, which it is her province to subdue and control, but not to crush or annihilate. There is, too, something to be admired in the exercise of a spirit that maintains itself firmly upright, amidst the chances and changes of fortune; something satisfactory even in the thought that we can endure the pelting of the pitiless storm, much as we may feel its searching bitterness.

"And thou, too, whoso'er thou art,
That readest this brief psalm,
As one by one thy hopes depart,
Be resolute and calm."

"Oh! fear not in a world like this,
And thou shalt know ere long—
Know how sublime a thing it is,
To suffer and be strong."

AMBITION.

THERE are few men who are not ambitious of distinguishing themselves in the nation or country where they live, and of growing considerable among those with whom they converse. There is a kind of grandeur and respect which the meanest and most insignificant part of mankind endeavour to procure in the little circle of their friends and acquaintances. The poorest mechanic, nay, the man who lives upon common alms, gets him his set of admirers and delights in that superiority which he enjoys over those who are in some respects beneath him. This ambition, which is natural to the soul of man, might, methinks, receive a very happy turn; and, if it were rightly directed, contribute as much to a person's advantage, as it generally does to his uneasiness and disquiet.—Addison.

DISEASE.

It may be said, that disease generally brings that equality which death completes. The distinctions which set one man so far above another, are very little preserved in the gloom of a sick chamber, where it will be in vain to expect entertainment from the gay, or instruction from the wise; where all human glory is obliterated, the wit clouded, the reason perplexed, and the hero subdued; where the highest and brightest of mortals find nothing left but consciousness and innocence.—Addison's Anecdotes.

THE BRITISH EMPIRE.

The following is taken from the *New York Journal of Commerce*—a paper remarkable for the liberality of its sentiments, and the ability with which it is conducted:—

THIS mother of nations claims to have been in existence more than a thousand years. Her vast dominions cover nearly three millions square miles. She possesses portions of each continent, and a multitude of the islands of the ocean. The number of her subjects is over two hundred millions. Almost one third of all the inhabitants of the earth bow to her sway, and are controlled by her policy. The greatness of her wealth it is impossible to compute. Twenty three thousand ships enter her ports during the year, which are laden with four and a half million tons of the wealth of distant climes. Twenty thousand carry forth, during the same time, three and a half millions tons of her stores. Nearly one hundred and fifty thousand vessels enter and clear from her ports during the year, which are engaged in her coasting trade. The stores of wealth hoarded in her bosom are not known; neither have we an estimate of the bounties of her soil. Her nobles and learned men are among the great men of the earth. She has long been a chief depository of the only principles of truth and virtue known among men. In a time of usual peace she commissions for her Navy nearly three hundred vessels, which could form a battery of four thousand six hundred and ninety guns. At the same time she employs an army of ninety-nine regiments of foot soldiers—twenty-four regiments of dragoons, besides fourteen other different regiments. What her strength would be in the hour of trouble, has never yet been fully shown. If any empire has ever existed on earth which could claim a pre-eminence over this, no records of it have come down to us.

LETTER-WRITING.

ONE of the most innocent and exquisite pleasures of this life is that of hearing from an absent friend. When we are suddenly reminded, by a letter, of one who is dear to us, and see our name in the well-known hand on the direction, a flash of delight pervades the whole frame; the heart beats with expectation while the seal is being broken, and, as the sheet is unfolded, goes forth in full benevolence to meet the heart of the writer in the perusal of its contents. An epistolary correspondence between intimate and endeared connexions is a spiritual communion, in which minds alone seem to mingle, and, unembarrassed by the bodily presence, converse with a freedom, and fervour, and an eloquence rarely excited, and perhaps never more felicitously indulged in personal intercourse. Hence the chief charm of a letter, if the term may so be applied, is its individuality, as a message from one whom we love or esteem, according to the degree of kin or congeniality between us, sent expressly on an errand of kindness to ourselves. The consciousness that it was written to and for him, gives the receiver a paramount interest in its existence, as well as in its disclosure. To him, therefore, it becomes an object of affection; and none but himself, however some others may sympathize with the feelings, can enter into it with the same degree of ineffable emotion; that, indeed, is "a joy with which a stranger intermeddeth not." In letter-writing, when the heart is earnestly engaged, the first thoughts in the first words are usually the best; for it is thoughts, not words, that are communicated; and meanings, not manner, which is mainly to be aimed at. The ideas that rise, and thicken as they rise, in a mind full and overflowing with its subject, voluntarily embody themselves in language the most easy and appropriate; yet are they so delicate and evanescent, that unless caught in the first forms, they soon lose their character and distinctness, blend with each other, and from being strikingly simple in succession, become inextricably complex in association, on account of their multiplicity and affinity. The thoughts that occur in letter-writing will not stay to be questioned; they must be taken at their word, or instantly dismissed. They are like colours from "a bank of violets"—a breath—and away. He that would revel on the fragrance, by scenting it hard and long, will feel that its deliciousness has eluded him; he may taste it again and again, and for a moment, but he might as well attempt to catch the rainbow, and hold it, as long to inhale and detain the subtle and volatile sweetness. He who once hesitates amid the flow of fresh feelings and their spontaneous expression, becomes unawares bewildered; and must either resolutely disengage himself by dashing right forward through the throng of materials, to recover the freedom of his pen, or he must patiently select and arrange them, as in a premeditated exercise of his mind—a given theme.—Montgomery.