

John Gay, “Fable XXXI: The Universal Apparition”

Description

JOHN GAY

“Fable XXXI: *The Universal Apparition*”

A RAKE, by ev’ry passion rul’d,
With ev’ry vice his youth had cool’d;
Disease his tainted blood assails,
His spirits droop, his vigour fails;
With secret ills at home he pines, 5
And, like infirm old age, declines.
As twing’d with pain, he pensive sits,
And raves, and prays, and swears, by fits,
A ghastly phantom, lean and wan,
Before him rose, and thus began— 10
 My name perhaps hath reach’d your ear;
Attend, and be advis’d by care.
Nor love, nor honour, wealth, nor pow’r,
Can give the heart a cheerful hour,
When health is lost.— Be timely wise: 15
With health all taste of pleasure flies.
 Thus said, the phantom disappears.
The wary counsel wak’d his fears.
He now from all excess abstains,
With physic purifies his veins; 20
And, to procure a sober life,
Resolves to venture on a wife.
 But now again the sprite ascends,
Where’er he walks his ear attends;
Insinuates that beauty’s frail, 25
That perseverance must prevail;
With jealousies his brain inflames,
And whispers all her lovers’ names.
In other hours she represents
His household charge, his annual rents, 30
Increasing debts, perplexing duns,
And nothing for his younger sons.
 Straight all his thought to gain he turns,
And with the thirst of lucre burns.
But, when possest of fortune’s store, 35

The spectre haunts him more and more;
 Sets want and misery in view,
 Bold thieves, and all the murd'ring crew,
 Alarms him with eternal frights,
 Infests his dream, or wakes his nights. 40
 How shall he chase this hideous guest?
 Pow'r may perhaps protect his rest;
 To pow'r he rose. Again the sprite
 Besets him morning, noon, and night;
 Talks of ambition's tott'ring seat, 45
 How envy persecutes the great,
 Of rival hate, of treach'rous friends,
 And what disgrace his fall attends.
 The court he quits to fly from Care,
 And seeks the peace of rural air. 50
 His groves, his fields, amus'd his hours;
 He prun'd his trees, he rais'd his flow'rs:
 But Care again his steps pursues;
 Warns him of blasts, of blighting dews,
 Of plund'ring insects, snails, and rains, 55
 And droughts, that starve the labour'd plains.
 Abroad, at home, the spectre's there;
 In vain we seek to fly from Care.
 At length he thus the ghost address—
 Since thou must be my constant guest, 60
 Be kind, and follow me no more,
 For Care by right should go before.

NOTES:

- 1** *Rake* “Fashionable or stylish man of promiscuous habits” (*OED*).
4 *spirits* “The animating or vital principle in man which gives life” (*OED*).
9 *wan* “gloomy” (*OED*).
20 *physic* “A medical substance or purgative” (*OED*).
22 *venture* “An occasion of trying ones chance” (*OED*).
23 *sprite* “Incorporeal being” (*OED*); *ascend* “To rise” (*OED*).
24 *attends* “To turn one’s ear to listen to” (*OED*).
27 *inflames* “The Showing of anger, passion, or zeal” (*OED*).
31 *duns* “Persistent demands for money” (*OED*).

34 *lucre* “Acquisition of something profitable” (*OED*).

44 *besets* “To assail on all sides” (*OED*).

54 *blasts* “Strong gusts of wind” (*OED*).

SOURCE: *Fables, volume 1* (London, 1793), pp. 138 – 141. [J. Paul Leonard Library]

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