Mary Masters, â??The Vanity of Human Lifeâ?•

Description

MARY MASTERS

â??The Vanity of Human Lifeâ?•

Ah! what is Life? how mutable and vain!
An Hour of Pleasure, and an Age of Pain.
Where changing Seasons are but varyâ??d Woes,
And with each Morning early Sorrow flows.
The busy Mind, with adverse Passions rent,
Still searches on, a Stranger to Content.
One Hour in gay and sprightly Mirth is passâ??d,
The next with melancholy Shades oâ??ercast.
Alternate Joy, alternate Grief we know,
Yet scarce can tell, whence these Excesses flow.
Elate to Day, we laugh and play and sing,
To-morrow sees a wretched, abject Thing.
With deep dejecting Cares we lie opprest,
And pensive Thoughts disturb the gloomy Breast.
Till other Thoughts revolve to our Relief,
And fansyâ??d Joys elude a real Grief.
Flattâ??ring ourselves, we fond Ideas frame
Of Human Happiness, an empty Dream.
Yet Man, whom evâ??ry Show of Bliss deceives,
Full Credit to the soothing Image gives.

Weâ??ve found (at least we think so) what, alone,
Can give the longing Mind a Peace unknown :
Had we but That, â??twouâ??d certain Ease restore,
Grant it, ye *Powâ??rs*, and we desire no more.
Yet if kind Fate the wishâ??d-for Blessing grant,
Weâ??re still dissatisfyâ??d, and something want :
Then, with repeated Care and anxious Pain,
We seek another Trifle to attain ;
Our wonted Vigilance and Toil renew,
To gain the glorious Thing we have in view.
And, if we do the mighty Something get,
Again are we deceivâ??d, â??tis all a Cheat.
Nor will this second Disappointment prove
Severe enough, our Folly to remove.
Still with a discontented, restless Mind,

We search for That, which we can never find.
Erring before, we mournâ??d; but, now, are sure
We know, what will a lasting Joy secure.

And did we err before? so err we now,
If we expect true Happiness below.
Should Heavâ??n, indulgent, lavish all its Store,
And give so largely we could wish no more;
This surely would our wayward Fancy please,
And bring our weary, labâ??ring Spirits Ease.
We should indeed be blest, should for a While,
Our Hopes with transitory Rest beguile.
Forgetful of the *Powâ??r Supreme,* that may,
When-eâ??er he pleases, snatch our Joys away.
Ah foolish Mortals, credulous and vain!
Prepare to meet the quick-returning Pain:
Still let us keep FUTURITY in View,
The Hand that gave the Gift, can take it too.

But cannot Gold afford a full Delight?
How the rich Metal glitters to the Sight!
O dazling Lustre! what would we not do,
What Toils not take, what Dangers not pursue,
For much of Thee, thou bright deluding Ill!
And in the warm Pursuit advance unwearyâ??d still?

In search of Toys, we precious Moments waste,
For Wealth has Wings, and often flies in haste.
The mighty Man, with ample Fortunes blest,
Of pondâ??rous Bags and stately Domes possest;
At Noon replete with all his Soulâ??s Desire,
At Night impovâ??rishâ??d by destructive Fire.
Such things may be, for such have often been,
A thousand fatal Mischiefs lurk unseen.

The busy Merchant trafficks oâ??er the Main,
And rifles foreign Countries for his Gain.
Nor Earth nor Water from his Spoils are free,
To heap up Gold, heâ??ll compass Land and Sea.
Behold him, waiting at the Oceanâ??s side,
While Ships from *India* break the flashing Tide:
Now one, long wishâ??d for with impatient Thought,
Is by his friendly Glass in Prospect brought.
Freighted with Gold and Silks of various Dyes,
And in her Womb an Ivory Treasure lies.
See, what calm Seas, and what propitious Gales,
Support her Keel, and swell her flying Sails!
His Thoughts flow quicker, and his Heart beats high,

His Joys increasing as the Barque draws nigh.
When lo! a sudden Change the Air invades,
And the Clouds thicken into sullen Shades:
Fierce Tempests beat, and angry Billows roar,
Distracting Sight to him that stands on shore.
Just ready to cast Anchor near the Coast,
Sad Terror to his soul! the Ship is lost.

Oh false and slippâ??ry State of human Things!
What sad Distress one hapless Moment brings!

So JOB with more than orient Brightness drest,
The Pride and Worship of the wondring East;
Sought by the Old, and honourâ??d by the Young,
The listâ??ning Ear paid Homage to his Tongue;
Princes arose, when he appearâ??d in Sight,
And the charmâ??d Eye beheld him with Delight.
For, Years he livâ??d, with Health and Glory crownâ??d,
And, like a God, dispensâ??d his Blessings round.
On either Hand, his Sons and Daughters sate,
And helpâ??d to swell the Fullness of his State.
Yet this consummate Grandeur provâ??d in vain,
For all was changâ??d to Poverty and Pain,
His Honour blasted, and his Children slain.
Sprinkled with Dust, and prostrate on the Earth,
In Bitterness of Soul he cursâ??d his Birth.

Oh Impotence of Wealth! can ought avail,
Where Gold, Magnificence, and Empire fail?

Yes, something more substantial yet remains,
A Sovereign Medâ??cine for severest Pains:
When great Afflictions overwhelm the Mind,
When evâ??ry Facultyâ??s to Grief resignâ??d;
When the whole Soul is sunk in deep Distress,
FRIENDSHIPâ??S soft Powâ??r can make its Sorrows less;
That nearest Emblem of indulgent Heavâ??n,
To sweeten Lifeâ??s predestinâ??d Ills, was givâ??n.
A faithful Friend is our extremest Good,
The richest Gift, that ever Heavâ??n bestowâ??d.
When the prest Bosom heaves with weighty Cares,
This kind Companion half the Burden bears:
With healing Counsel mitigates our Woe,
Or wisely teaches how to bear the Blow.
Our Pleasures too the much-lovâ??d Friend divides,
Adds Joy to Joy, and swells the happy Tides.

Pleasâ??d with my Subject, more than fond of Fame,
I much could say on this delightful Theme.

But â??tis too copious and sublime a Strain,
More fit for YOUNG, or POPEâ??S unbounded Vein.
The brightest Numbers that were ever pennâ??d,
Should celebrate the just and genâ??rous Friend.
On me would partial Fortune this bestow,
â??Tis all the Happiness Iâ??d ask below.
Yet, of a Treasure so immense possest,
Vainly we hope to be for ever blest.
Still are we governâ??d by inconstant Fate,
And the first Turn may change our pleasing State:
May force us (thoâ?? with deep Regret) to part
From the dear, trusted Inmate of our Heart.

Oh Agony of Thought! what Breast can bear
So vast a Shock, or who the Grief declare?

DAVID alone the great Distress could paint,
And in fit Language form the just Complaint.
To his dear JONATHAN due Rites he paid,
He lovâ??d him living, and he mournâ??d him dead.
Mournâ??d him in such a graceful, moving Strain,
As all admire, and emulate in vain.
His sweet, pathetick Sorrows finely show,
The noblest Heights of Tenderness and Woe.
While sacred Leaves record the pious Theme,
A lasting Monument to Friendshipâ??s Name.

Sometimes we more exalting Joys pursue,
And Pleasures charm us in a diffâ??rent View.
One beauteous Form has struck upon the Mind,
A sweet Impression, casual, or designâ??d.
To one fixâ??d Centre all our Wishes move,
And the transported Heart rebounds with Love.
In that fond Passion we expect to meet
A full Content, a Happiness complete.
Then, with glad Toil and with incessant Care,
We strive to gain what seems so wondâ??rous fair.
Whilst the dear Object, we most highly prize,
Rejects our Vows, and mocks our promisâ??d Joys.
And sure we can no greater Torment prove,
Than cold Disdain repaid for constant Love.

But should our Passion meet a just Return,
And either Breast with mutual Ardor burn,
Some unforeseen Misfortune may divide,
Those faithful Hearts, which equal Love has tyâ??d.
Then, who can dictate, or what Words can show
The agonizing Pain, the pungent Woe?

But weâ??ll suppose a milder Fortune still,
A present Pleasure and a distant Ill:
Our Wishes crownâ??d, the Prize obtainâ??d at last,
The bright Reward of all our Labours past:
The Danger over, and absolvâ??d the Vow,
O, Joy too great! what can afflict us now?
Yet *Time*â??s frail Glass is fillâ??d with flitting Sand,
And held too in a paralytick Hand.
That soon may break, or That may quickly run,
Which holds a Life more precious than our own,
And then alas the Hour of Joy is done.

So JACOB, after being blest for Years,
Fair RACHEL mournâ??d with unavailing Tears.
She, for whose Sake his Youth and Strength he gave,
And fourteen annual Circles livâ??d a Slave;
Breathless and cold before her Lover laid,
Snatchâ??d from his Arms and numberâ??d with the Dead.

And, thus, we see, â??tis evidently plain,
What-eâ??er depends on Life, is weak and vain.
Gold is too fleeting, Friendshipâ??s healing Powâ??r
May be dissolvâ??d in one destructive Hour.
That Loveâ??s fantastick Bliss is not sincere,
That Human Life is Hope, and Doubt, and Fear,
A little Pleasure and a Load of Care.

NOTES:

1 *mutable* â??Liable or subject to change or alterationâ?• *(OED).*

12 *abject* â??Cast off, rejectedâ?• (*OED*).

29 *wonted* â??Accustomed, customary, usualâ?• (*OED*).

41 *Store* â??Sufficient or abundant supplyâ?• (*OED*).

46 *beguile* â??Deceiveâ?• (*OED*).

47 *Powâ??r Supreme* God.

62 *Domes* â??Stately buildings, mansionsâ?• (*OED*).

80 *Barque* â??A small shipâ?• (*OED*).

89 *JOB* Masters is paraphrasing chapters 1-3 from the Book of Job.

99 *consummate* â??Completed, perfectedâ?• (*OED*).

125 *YOUNG* Edward Young (1683-1765), whose series of satires, *The Universal Passion* (1725-28) were much admired; *POPE* Alexander Pope (1688-1744), whose *Moral Essays* began appearing in 1731.

138 *DAVID* King of Israel (I Samuel 18:1-3).

140 *JONATHAN* Son of Saul; see II Samuel 1:17-27 for Davidâ??s lament at the death of his friend.

163 *Ardor* â??Heat of passion or desireâ?• (*OED*).

179-80 *JACOBâ?¦RACHEL* Jacob was tricked by his uncle Laban into working fourteen years to win Rachel in marriage. Masters is paraphrasing Genesis 29:15-30.

SOURCE: *Poems on Several Occasions* (London, 1733), pp. 193-205. [Google Books]

Edited by Hailey Franzese