

**THE MISERIES OF
HUMAN LIFE; AN OLD
FRIEND IN A NEW DRESS**

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The miseries of human life; an old friend in a new dress by James Beresford

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JAMES BERESFORD

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P R E F A C E .

WE must apologize to true lovers of antiquity for certain changes which we have thought it expedient to make, in this time-honored schedule of the minor miseries that fastidious flesh is heir to, in this dislocated world of ours. The great troubles are perennial, as they are universal. The alternation of smiles and tears in human life, is as constant and as decided as the general division of the earth's surface into land and water ; but the fluctuation of the self-inflicted or factitious miseries occasioned by changes of fashion and growth of luxury, is like that produced by the partial wearing away of rocky shores, or the gradual retrocession of the ocean. A gallant of Elizabeth's time *might* have complained, if the rushes that strewed the floor of the banqueting-hall, were so much loaded with bones, and other remnants of the feast, that he could not approach his ladye-love, as she sat on the dais, without total sacrifice of grace and dignity ; but would he have thought it necessary, like a beau of the present day, that the soft carpet of winter, with its splendors of flower

and leaf, should in summer give place to a smooth Indian matting, for the sake of coolness to his tender foot, and his still more susceptible imagination? If Messieurs Testy and Sensitive had undertaken to record their private personal sufferings, three hundred years ago, the recital would not have elicited a single groan of sympathy from any of us, any more than the lamentations of an Esquimaux over a deficiency of train oil, or the pettish exclamations of a Hottentot belle, against the butcher who has failed to supply her in time with the peculiar substances essential to her idea of an elegant *toilette*.

Books like this are, in fact, unconscious chroniclers of the progress of common things; truer and more available, perhaps, than intentional records. We get information about dress, customs, and the condition of the social arts in Charles II.'s time, from Pepys's diary and such like prattle, that no writer, grave enough to sit down with the intent to give us information, would have thought worth transmitting. In truth, much of the spirit of a picture lies in the accessories. But we consider that the "Miseries of Human Life," as it stood, had performed its mission for the days of stage-coaches, knee-breeches, and tallow-candles. Those and other horrors, though past, are still too recent to have acquired interest or dignity through the mists of Time. There is a wide difference between being antique and being old-fashioned. "Fish," says the proverb, "is good, but fishy is detestable." We had not the audacity to attempt a wholly new book of this kind, since every production of original genius is unique;

and, moreover, even the French, so potent in pettiness, have failed signally, in their *Petites Misères de la Vie Humaine*,⁷ to reproduce in another form these racy dialogues. Their book, where it strives to be genteel, is frigid; and when it lapses into the familiar, becomes coarse. Warned, therefore, we adhere to the simple personalities that come home to every man's business and bosom, and to the homely hints which the genial smiles of two generations, have already acknowledged to be apposite to universal human nature—its wants and whims—its proprieties and its exactions. But as we desire, above all things, a quick, ready, irresistible sympathy for our petty (*i. e.*, incident to pets) and pungent (*i. e.*, fruitful in puns) miseries of the happy—(Q. Can the neutral word *mis-hap* have been originally a compound from *misery* and *happiness*, as signifying something between the two?)—we have judged it best, in some cases, to substitute for certain dilemmas which are neither old enough nor new enough to be *piquant*, corresponding ones costumed for our own time and meridian, lest the Testys and Sensitives of to-day—it is a great family—should set us down as fellows of no mark or likelihood: a conclusion which might affect our market and livelihood, in the long run, by making it short. To be suspected of being mental and moral rhinoceroses, might attack our rhino seriously; so we think it expedient to show our sensitiveness to trifles, that, *ex pede*, the fastidious may judge of our fitness to trifle with their sensitiveness. A man of nerve is not the right consoler for a nervous man; nor can a lady who has never had a lover be expected to sympathize

very sincerely with a rival who has just lost one. So decided and recognized is the demand for sympathy, in those who would aid us, that physicians invariably make faces while they are amputating or applying hot towels. We trust our delicacy will be made apparent in the straits through which we conduct the reader, as the pilot proved his knowledge of "every rock in the channel," by running the ship on a sharp point, exclaiming, "There's one of 'em now!" If there is any thing irritating, it is to be told by a fellow whose nerves never felt any rasp finer than an alligator's jaw—"Never mind!" What does he know of the tortures a doubled rose-leaf may bring to one whose sensibilities have been properly cultivated, while his power of resistance has grown

"Fine by degrees, and beautifully less!"

What does common sense know of uncommon sensitiveness? Why are people called fastidious, but because they *will* have what they want, *per fas aut nefas*, let who will suffer? The same root will probably be found to have borne the fashionable term "fast;" for though the signification may be a little modified, the main point—viz., the courage required for walking over other people's impertinent rights and feelings—is still the leading idea. What business have "other people" with feelings?

A lady's dog bit a beggar-boy. "Poor dear!" exclaimed the sensitive creature—*i. e.*, the lady—"I hope it will not make him sick!"—*i. e.*, the dog. Exquisitely sympathetic nature!

It is confidently hoped that our *Miseries*, as revised, will prove highly acceptable, in particular to persons whose early education has been neglected. If there be any thing that fatally betrays our having ever been in narrow circumstances, it is the power of putting up with difficulties and disagreeables—any thing short of perfection in any thing. The art of finding fault is first among the accomplishments of him who would substantiate his pretensions to gentility. To be easily pleased, stamps the individual as commonplace. Whether in travelling or at home, the more waiting on we require, the more we are respected; and if we would have the house fairly at our feet, we must let our dinner cool while we wrangle about a chafing-dish, and swear at the chambermaid if she forget to leave a bible in our bedroom.

Now, this, our excellent and portable manual, is rammed with hints as to all such matters. Every supposable incident of provocation is here collected, and the degree to which it is proper to be enraged at each, plainly hinted, if not expressly prescribed. Young people may here learn when it is best only to pout, and again under what circumstances scolding would be *en règle*; while their elders will find themselves supplied with objurgations, both Latin and English, on occasion of every petty ill, from the encroachment of a friend to the blunder of a servant.

In performing this service to the great world of those who are striving to appear not small, we have ventured, spite of the caution of Doctor Holmes—the Holmes of American Authors—in most cases, to write “as funny as we can;” for

while we have a tender regard for buttons, we remember also the fate of that Roman author (Q. consul?) who, writing about the grievances of the day, gave them a turn so lugubrious that "many were driven to hang and drown themselves in despair;" upon which the public authorities—perhaps the city corporation—determined never to reform any abuses, but only to stifle all notice of them—"forbade the said authors to write so any more!"—a prohibition which we should be loth to encounter.

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