Essays, in a Series of Letters--

Foster John
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ESSAYS

IN A

SERIES OF LETTERS.

BY JOHN FOSTER,

AUTHOR OF

"AN ESSAY ON POPULAR IGNORANCE," &c.

THE NINTH EDITION, CORRECTED.

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Perhaps it will be thought that pieces written so much in the manner of set compositions as the following, should not have been denominated Letters; it may therefore be proper to say, that they are so called because they were actually addressed to a friend. They were written however with an intention to put them in print, if, when they were finished, the writer could persuade himself that they deserved it; and the temper of even the most inconsiderable pretenders to literature in these times is too well known for any one to be surprised that he could so persuade himself.

When he began these letters, his intention was to confine himself within such limits, that essays on twelve or fifteen subjects might be comprised in a volume. But he soon found that so narrow a space would exclude many illustrations not less appropriate or useful than any which would be introduced.
It will not seem a very natural manner of commencing a course of letters to a friend, to enter formally on a subject in the first sentence. In excuse for this abruptness it may be mentioned, that there was an introductory letter; but as it was written in the presumption that a considerable variety of subjects would be treated in the compass of a moderate number of letters, it is omitted, as not being adapted to precede what is executed in a manner so different from the design.

When writing which has occupied a considerable length, and has been interrupted by considerable intervals, of time, which is also on very different subjects, and was perhaps meditated under the influence of different circumstances, is at last all gone over in one short course of perusal, this immediate succession and close comparison make the writer sensible of some things of which he was not aware in the slow separate stages of the progress. On thus bringing the following essays under one review, the writer perceives some reason to apprehend, that the spirit of the third may appear so different from that of the second, as to give an impression of something like inconsistency. The second may be thought to have an appearance of representing that a man may effect almost every thing, the third that he can effect scarcely any thing.
But the writer would say, that the one does not assert the efficacy of human resolution and effort under the same conditions under which the other asserts their inefficacy; and that therefore there is no real contrariety between the principles of the two essays. From the evidence of history and familiar experience we know that, under certain conditions, and within certain limits, (strait ones indeed,) an enlightened and resolute human spirit has great power, this greatness being relative to the measures of things within a small sphere; while it is equally obvious that this enlightened and resolute spirit, if disregarding these conditions, and attempting to extend its agency over a much wider sphere, shall find its power baffled and annihilated, till it draws back within the boundary. Now the great power of the human mind within the narrow limit being forcibly and largely insisted on at one time, and its impotence beyond that limit, at another, the assemblage of sentiments and exemplifications most adapted to illustrate, (and without real or considerable exaggeration,) that power alone, will form apparently so strong a contrast with the assemblage of thoughts and facts proper for illustrating that imbecility alone, that on a superficial view the two representations may appear contradictory. The author appeals to the experience of such thinking men as are accustomed to commit
their thoughts to writing, whether sometimes, on comparing the pages in which they had endeavoured to place one truth in the strongest light, with those in which they have endeavoured a strong but yet not extravagant exhibition of another, they have not felt a momentary difficulty to reconcile them, even while satisfied of the substantial justness of both. The whole doctrine on any extensive moral subject necessarily includes two views which may be considered as its extremes; and if these are strongly stated quite apart from their relations to each other, both the representations may be perfectly true, and yet may require, in order to the reader's perceiving their consistency, a recollection of many intermediate ideas.

In the fourth essay, it was not intended to take a comprehensive or systematic view of the causes, contributing to prevent the candid attention and the cordial admission due to evangelical religion, but simply to select a few which had particularly attracted the writer's observation. One or two more would have been specified and slightly illustrated, if the essay had not been already too long.
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TO THE NINTH EDITION.

As it is signified in the title-page that the book is corrected in this edition, it may not be impertinent to indicate by a few sentences the nature and amount of the correction. After a revisal which introduced a number of small verbal alterations in one of the later of the preceding editions, the writer had been willing to believe himself excused from any repetition of that kind of task. But when it was becoming probable that the new edition now printed would be called for, an acute literary friend strongly recommended one more and a final revisal; enforcing his recommendation by pointing out, in various places, what the writer readily acknowledged to be faults
in the composition. This determined him to try the effect of a careful inspection throughout, with a view to such an abatement of the imperfections of the book, as might make him decidedly content to let it go without any future revision.

In this operation there has been no attempt at novelty, beyond such slight changes and diminutive additions as appeared necessary in order to give a more exact or full expression of the sense. There is not, probably, more of anything that could properly be called new, than might be contained in half-a-dozen pages. Correction, in the strict sense, has been the object. Sentences, of ill-ordered construction, or loose or inconsequential in their connexion, have been attempted to be reformed. In some instances a sentence has been abbreviated, in others a little extended by the insertion of an explanatory or qualifying clause. Here and there a sentence has been substituted for one that was not easily reducible to the exact direction of the line of thought, or appeared feeble in expression. In several instances some modification has been required, to obviate a