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A FEW REMARKS ON THE ADVANTAGES OF
A SINGLE LIFE.*

(Read before the Members of the Shakspeare Club.)

LET us, however, leave the poets for the philosophers—the imaginative for the real—the castle-in-the-air-builders for the founders of systems and great discoverers of truth. Of these, one of the very greatest, Lord Bacon, has left us his opinions in an Essay on the Advantages of Marriage and a Single Life. An extract will serve to show that the opinions of this great man are not unfavorable to celibacy:—“He that hath wife and children,” says Lord Bacon, “hath given hostages to fortune; for they are impediments to great enterprise, either of virtue or mischief. Certainly the best works, and of greatest merit for the public, have proceeded from the unmarried or childless men, who, both in affection and means, have married and endowed the public. Yet it were great reason that those that have children should have greatest care of future times, unto which they must transmit their future pledges.” And so he goes on, balancing argument against argument, like a judge summing up, till both sides seem right and both wrong!

Bacon, however, was married; but there is another whose fame stands even on a firmer basis, because the voice of detraction was never yet raised against it, who exhibited in this respect more wisdom. I mean Sir Isaac Newton, who lived and died unmarried. He, indeed, affords a striking proof of the incompatibility of the marriage state with the pursuits of the philosopher. A wife would have driven Newton mad, and deprived society of the benefit of his immense discoveries. Those who have read his life, are aware that he was so completely wrapped up in scientific pursuits, as to be unable to attend to any thing else. It is told of him, that when dressing in the morning, he would sit for hours with one leg in and one leg out of his trowsers, engaged in thought. What would Mrs. Newton have said to this? Would she have tolerated that the tea and toast should get cold, whilst he was ruminating in this singular manner? I can imagine her gentle voice arousing him with “Newton, really one would think you were quite a fool, to sit there in that extraordinary position. Really, Sir, I don’t consider it decent or proper! Why don’t you put on your things and come down to breakfast like every other well behaved married man!” Breakfast! what was breakfast to him at such moments, when he was, doubtless, engaged in following out those great scientific truths, which he afterwards gave to the world, and on which his reputation rests! Still there is no denying, that these eccentricities would have been rather trying to a matrimonial partner, and that had there been a

Lady Newton, she would have had no reason to bless her stars for having married a philosopher.

Amongst the severer geniuses, Gibbon, Adam Smith, Hume, Galileo, Descartes, Boyle, Locke, Leibnitz, and a long list of other illustrious men, all led single lives. The first (Gibbon) was at one time in love with a lady, who afterwards married Neckar. Society has, however, reason to rejoice that he escaped the snare, for had he yielded, the probability is, that we should have had only a nursery of children, instead of the “Decline and Fall.”

Dr. Johnson was married, but there was a good deal of the Dictionary about the affair, and the account which we have of it is ludicrous enough. The lady was a Mrs. Porter, and was double the age of her lover. Both of them were as ugly as sin, and although there was a great deal of awkward love manifested, there was certainly very little romance at the commencement. I will quote the account given by Boswell, which is really an example of how these matters ought to be managed, and a specimen of the proper way of breaking in a wife.

“Miss Porter told me,” says Boswell, “that when Dr. Johnson was first introduced to her mother, his appearance was very forbidding; he was then lean and lank, so that his immense structure of bones was hideously striking to the eye, and the scars of the scrophula were deeply visible. He also wore his hair, (in those days it was the fashion to wear wigs), which was straight and stiff, and separated behind; and he often had, seemingly, convulsive starts and odd gesticulations, which tended to create at once surprise and ridicule. Mrs. Porter was so much engaged by his conversation, that she overlooked all these external disadvantages, and said to her daughter, ‘this is the most sensible man that I ever saw in my life.’”

“Though Mrs. Porter was double the age of Johnson, and her person and manner, as described to me by the late Mr. Garrick, were by no means pleasing to others, she must have had a superiority of understanding and talents, as she certainly inspired him with more than an ordinary passion; and she having expressed her willingness to accept of his hand, he went to Litchfield to ask his mother’s consent to the marriage, which he could not but be conscious was a very imprudent scheme, both on account of their disparity of years, and her want of fortune. But Mrs. Johnson knew too well the ardour of her son’s temper, and was too tender a parent to oppose his inclinations.

“I know not for what reason the marriage ceremony was not performed at Birmingham; but a resolution was taken that it should be at Derby, for which place the bride and bridegroom set out on horseback, I suppose in very good humour. But though Mr. Topham Beauclerk used archly to mention Johnson’s having told him, with much gravity, ‘Sir, it was a love marriage on both sides,’ I have had from my illustrious friend the following curious account of their journey to church upon the nuptial morn (9th July):—‘Sir,

* Continued from page 71.