

DR. JOHNSON AND MARY KNOWLES.

(FROM A LETTER FROM ANNA SEWARD.)

Behold, dear M—, the promised minutes of that curious conversation which once passed at Mr. Dilly's, the bookseller, in a literary party, formed by Dr. Johnson, Mr. Boswell, Dr. Mayo, and others, whom Mrs. Knowles and myself had been invited to meet, and in which Dr. Johnson and that lady disputed so earnestly. It is, however, previously necessary that you should know the history of the very amiable young woman who was the subject of their debate.

Jenny Harry was the daughter of a rich planter in the East Indies. He sent her over to England to receive her education, in the house of his friend, Mr. Spry, where Mrs. Knowles, the celebrated Quakeress, was frequently a visitor. Mr. Spry affected wit, and was perpetually rallying Mrs. Knowles on the subject of Quakerism, in the presence of this young, gentle, and ingenuous girl, who, at the age of eighteen, had received what is called a proper education—one of modern accomplishments—without having been much instructed in the nature and grounds of her religious belief. Upon these visits, Mrs. Knowles was often led into a serious defence of Quaker principles. She spoke with clear and graceful eloquence on every subject. Her antagonists were shallow theologians, and opposed only idle and pointless railery to deep and long-studied reasoning on the precepts of Scripture, uttered in persuasive accents, and clothed with all the beauty of language. Without any design of making a proselyte, she gained one.

Miss Harry grew pensively serious, and meditated perpetually on all which had dropped from the lips of Mrs. Knowles, on a theme, the infinite importance of which she then perhaps for the first time, began to feel. At length, her imagination pursuing this, its primal religious bias, she believed Quakerism the only true Christianity. Beneath such conviction, she thought it her duty to join, at every hazard of worldly interest, that class of worshippers. On declaring these sentiments, several ingenious clergymen were commissioned to reason with her; but we all know the force of first impressions in theology. This young lady was argued with by the divines, and threatened by her guardian in vain. She persisted in resigning her splendid expectations for what appeared to her the path of duty.

Her father, on being made acquainted

with her changed faith, informed her that she might choose between a hundred thousand pounds and his favor, or two thousand pounds and his renunciation, as she continued a Churchwoman or commenced a Quaker.

Miss Harry lamented her father's displeasure, but thanked him for the pecuniary alternative, assuring him that it included all her wishes as to fortune. Soon after, she left her guardian's house, and boarded in that of Mrs. Knowles; to her she often observed that Dr. Johnson's displeasure, whom she had often seen at her guardian's, and who always appeared fond of her, was amongst the greatest mortifications of her then situation.

Once she came home in tears, and told her friend she had met Dr. Johnson in the street, and had ventured to ask him how he did; but that he would not deign to answer her, and walked scornfully on. She added, "You are to meet him soon at Mr. Dilly's—plead for me."

Thus far as prefatory to these requested minutes which I made at the time of the ensuing conversation. It commenced with Mrs. Knowles saying,—

"I am to ask thy indulgence, Doctor, towards a gentle female to whom thou usest to be kind, and who is uneasy at the loss of that kindness. Jenny Harry weeps at the consciousness that thou wilt not speak to her."

"Madam, I hate the odious wench, and desire you will not talk to me about her."

"Yet, what is her crime, Doctor?"

"Apostasy, madam, apostasy from the community in which she was educated."

"Surely, the quitting one community for another cannot be a crime, if it is done from motives of conscience. Hadst thou been educated in the Romish Church, I must suppose thou wouldst have abjured its errors, and that there would have been merit in the abjuration."

"Madam, if I had been educated in the Roman Catholic faith, I believe I should have questioned my right to quit the religion of my fathers; therefore, well may I hate the arrogance of a young wench who sets herself up for a judge on theological points, and deserts the religion in whose bosom she was nurtured."

"She has not done so: the name and the faith of Christians are not denied to the sectaries."

"If the name is not, the common-sense is."

"I will not dispute this point with thee, Doctor, at least at present; it would carry