OF LARGE ACQUAINTANCE; OR, AN ESSAY TO PROVE THE FOLLY OF SEEKING MANY FRIENDS.

1. MENON the Thessalian, a person who had no mean opinion of his own parts, who thought himself well accomplished in all the arts of discourse and to have reached (as Empedocles words it) the highest pitch of wisdom, was asked by Socrates, What is virtue? And he answered readily enough, and as impertinently, that there is one virtue belonging to childhood, another to old age; that there are distinct virtues in men and women, magistrates and private persons, masters and servants. Excellently well! replied Socrates in raillery, when you were asked about one virtue, you have raised, as it were, a whole swarm; conjecturing, not without reason, that the man therefore named many because he knew the nature of none. And may not we ourselves expect and deserve as justly to be scoffed and rallied, who having not yet contracted one firm friendship seem nevertheless exceeding cautious of too many? It is almost the same thing as if one maimed and blind should appear solicitous lest like Briareus he may chance to be furnished with a hundred hands, and become all over eyes like Argus. However, we cannot but extol the sense of that young man in Menander the poet, who said that he counted every man wonderfully honest and happy who had found even the shadow of a friend.

2. But all the difficulty lies in finding him; and the chiefest reason is that, instead of one choice true friend, nothing under a multitude will content us; like women of the town who admit the embraces of all gallants that come, at the gay appearance of the last which comes we neglect and slight the former, and so are unable to hold them. Or rather, like the foster-child of Hypsipyle, who "in a green meadow sat cropping the flowers one after another, snatching each prize with delighted heart, insatiable in his childish joy," * — so we of riper years, from an inbred affection of novelty and disdain of things already possessed, take up presently with the first promising aspect of every fresh and new-blooming friend, and lay all at once the foundations of several acquaintances; but we leave each unfinished, and when we have scarce fixed on one, our love immediately palls there, while we passionately pursue some other.

Wherefore, in this affair, — to begin at the beginning (at the domestic altar, as the saying is), — let us ask the opinion and counsel of our forefathers, and consider what report the records of antiquity make concerning true friends. They are, we find, always reckoned in pairs; as Theseus and Pirithous, Achilles and Patroclus, Orestes and Pylades, Phintias and Damon, Epaminondas and Pelopidas. Friendship (so to speak) is a creature sociable, but affects not a herd or a flock; and that we usually esteem a friend another self, and call him ἑταῖρος (companion) as much as to say ἕτερος (the other one), is a convincing argument that the number two is the adequate and complete measure of friendship. And in truth, a great

* Εἰς τὸν λειμῶνα καθίσας
ἔδρεπεν ἕτερον ἐφ' ἑτέρῳ
αἱρόμενος ἀγρευμα ἀνθέων
ἡδομένᾳ ψυχᾷ,
τὸ νήπιον ἄπληστον ἔχων.

From the Hypsipyle of Euripides.

number of friends or servants is not to be purchased at an easy rate. That which procures love and friendship in the world is a sweet and obliging temper of mind, a lively readiness in doing good offices, together with a constant habit of virtue; than which qualifications nothing is more rarely found in nature. Therefore to love and to be beloved much can have no place in a multitude; but the most eager affection, if divided among numerous objects, like a river divided into several channels, must needs flow at length very weak and languid. Upon this score, those animals love their young most which generate but one; and Homer, describing a beloved child, calls it the only-begotten and born in old age, — that is, at such a time when the parents neither have nor hope for another.*

3. Yet I do not assert we ought to confine ourselves to one only friend; but among the rest, there should be one eminently so, like a well-beloved and only son, not casually picked up at a tavern or eating-house or in a tennis-court, nor at a game of hazard, nor at an accidental meeting in the wrestling-place or the market, — as is too common nowadays, — but one chosen upon long and mature deliberation, with whom (according to that celebrated proverb) we have eaten a bushel of salt.

The palaces of noble men and princes appear guarded with splendid retinues of diligent obsequious servants, and every room is crowded with a throng of visitors, who caress the great man with all the endearing gestures and expressions that wit and breeding can invent; and it may be thought, I confess, at first sight, that such are very fortunate in having so many cordial, real friends at their command; whereas it is all bare pageantry and show. Change the scene, and you may observe a far greater number of flies as industriously busy in their kitchens; and as these would vanish, were the dishes empty and clean, so neither

* Il. IX. 482.

would that other sort of insect pay any farther respect, were nothing to be got by it.

There are chiefly these requisites to a true friendship: virtue, as a thing lovely and desirable; familiarity, as pleasant; and advantage, as necessary. For we must first choose a friend upon a right judgment made of his excellent qualities; having chosen him, we must perceive a pleasure in his conversation, and upon occasion he must be useful to us in our concerns. All which (especially judgment in our choice, the main point of all) are inconsistent with a numerous acquaintance.

And first of all (to draw a parallel in other matters), if there is no small time required to select a great many persons together who can dance and sing in exact time to the same tune, manage oars with a like strength and vigor, be fit stewards of our estates or tutors of our children, certainly we must acknowledge it much more difficult to meet with a considerable number of friends, ready to enter with us the trial of all manner of fortune, of whom every one will

> Of his good fortune yield thy part to thee,
> And bear like part of thy calamity.

Even a ship at sea runs not the risk of so many storms, nor are any castles, forts, and havens secured with walls, ramparts, and dams against the apprehension of so many dangers, as are the misfortunes against which a constant approved friendship mutually undertakes to afford a defence and refuge. Whoever without due trial put themselves upon us for friends we examine as bad money; and the cheat being discovered, we are glad if of their own accord they withdraw; or if they persist, at least we wish with great impatience fairly to get rid of them.* Yet we must own it is a hard and troublesome task to cast off a disagreeable acquaintance; for as unwholesome meats which

* Sophocles, Frag. 778.

nauseate the stomach can neither be retained without hazard of health, nor yet ejected sincere as they were taken, but wholly disguised and defiled with other humors; so a mistaken false friend must either be still entertained, and remain a mere vexation to us as well as uneasy to himself, or else by a kind of convulsion be thrown up like bile, leaving behind the continual torment of private grudgings and hatred.

4. Therefore it highly concerns us not to be too rash in fastening on the next that may accidentally offer, nor presently to affect every one that pretends to be fond of our friendship. Let the search rather begin on our own part, and our choice fix on those who approve themselves really worthy of our respect. What is cheap and with ease obtained is below our notice; and we trample under foot bushes and brambles that readily catch hold of us, while we diligently clear our way to the vine and olive; so it is always best not to admit to our familiarity persons who officiously stick and twist themselves about us, but we ought rather of our own accord to court the friendship of those who are worthy of our regard, and who prove advantageous to ourselves.

5. Therefore, as Zeuxis replied to some who blamed the slowness of his pencil, — that he therefore spent a long time in painting, because he designed his work should last for a long eternity, — so he that would secure a lasting friendship and acquaintance must first deliberately judge and thoroughly try its worth, before he settles it. Suppose then it is hard to make a right judgment in choosing many friends together, it may still be asked whether we may not maintain a familiarity with many persons, or whether that too is impossible. Now familiarity and converse are the genuine products and enjoyments of true friendship, and the highest pleasure the best friends aim at is continual intercourse and the daily frequenting one another's company.

No more shall meet Achilles and his friend;
No more our thoughts to those we loved make known,
Or quit the dearest, to converse alone.*

And, as Menelaus says of Ulysses: —

There with commutual zeal we both had strove
In acts of dear benevolence and love, —
Brothers in peace, not rivals in command, —
And death alone dissolved the friendly band.†

Now much acquaintance has a clear contrary effect; and whereas single friendship by kind discourses and good offices cements, unites, and condenses as it were two parties, —

As when the fig-tree's juice curdles and binds white milk, ‡

as Empedocles says; this on the other hand unties, rends, and breaks the bond, distracts our inclinations with too much variety; and the agreeable just mixture of affection, the very cement of true friends, is wholly lost in so loose and confused a conversation. Hence at once arises great inequality with respect to the services of friendship, and a foolish diffidence in the performance of them. For multiplicity of friends renders those very parts of friendship vain and useless whence advantage was most expected; neither can we hope it should be otherwise, if we consider how "one man is acted upon by his nature and another by his cares and anxieties." Nature hath not bestowed the same inclinations on all, nor are we all born to the same fortune; and the occasions of our actions, like the wind, may often favor one of our acquaintance while they stand cross to another.

6. However, suppose by great chance all should agree to crave assistance in the same affair, whether at a consult, exercise of a public trust in the government, canvassing for preferment, entertaining guests, or the like; yet it is exceeding hard to satisfy all. But now if they are engaged in diverse concerns at the very same moment of time, and

* Il. XXIII. 77. † See Odyss. IV. 178. ‡ See Il. V. 902.

every one should make his particular request to you, one to take a voyage with him, another to assist in pleading his cause, a third to prosecute a criminal, a fourth to help in managing his trade, another to celebrate his wedding, and another to attend a funeral, —

> And the whole city's filled with incense smoke,
> And songs of triumph mixt with groans resound; *

I say, in this case, it is utterly impossible to answer the requests of all, to gratify none is absurd, and to serve only one and disoblige the rest is a thing grievous and intolerably rude; — "for no one, when he loves a friend, will bear to be neglected." † If indeed you could persuade that inadvertency was the cause of the omission, you might more easily hope a pardon; and to plead forgetfulness is a sort of excuse which perhaps might pass without much angering your friend; but to allege "I could not be advocate in your cause, being of counsel for another," or "I could not visit you in a fever, because I was invited to a feast elsewhere," while it is thus confessed that we neglect one friend to pay our respects to another, is so far from extenuating the offence, that it highly aggravates it, and adds all the jealousies of rivalry.

But commonly men overlook these and such like inconveniences of a numerous acquaintance, and take only a prospect of its advantages, not in the least reflecting that whoever employs many assistants in his affairs must in gratitude repay his service to as many when they need it; and as Briareus, who with his hundred hands was daily obliged for his bare subsistence to feed fifty stomachs, could thrive no better than ourselves, who supply a single one with two hands, so a man of many friends cannot boast any other privilege but that of being a slave to many, and of sharing in all the business, cares, and disquiet that may befall them. Nor can Euripides help him by advising that

* Sophocles, Oed. Tyr. 4. † From Menander.

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