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Miscellaneous works Of The Late Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl Of Chesterfield

Consisting Of Letters to his Friends, never before printed, And Various
Other Articles

**Chesterfield, Philip Dormer Stanhope of
Dublin, 1777**

XXXVIII. The World. Thursday, March 6, 1755. N° 114.

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“ we severally endeavour by all possible means, you
 “ to fatten, and I to waste, till we can meet at the
 “ medium of eighteen stone. I will lose no time on my
 “ part, being impatient to prove to you that I am not
 “ quite unworthy of the good opinion which you are pleas-
 “ ed to express of,

SIR,

“ Your very humble servant.

“ *P. S.* I believe it may not be amiss for us to com-
 “ municate to each other, from time to time, our
 “ gradations of increase or decrease, towards the de-
 “ sired medium, in which, I presume, two or three
 “ pounds more or less, on either side, ought not to
 “ be considered.”

This, among many more cases that I could mention, sufficiently proves, not only the expediency, but the necessity, of restoring, revising, and perhaps adding to, the practice, rules and statutes, of single combat, as it flourished in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. I grant that it would probably make the common law useless; but little, trifling, and private interests ought not to stand in the way of great, public, and national advantages.

XXXVIII.

THE WORLD.

THURSDAY, March 6, 1755. N^o 114.

THE notion of BIRTH, as it is commonly called and established by custom, is also the manifest result of *the prejudices of the many, and of the designs of a few.* It is the child of Pride and Folly, coupled together by that industrious pandar Self-love. It is surely the strongest instance, and the weakest prop, of human vanity. If it means any thing, it means a long lineal descent from a founder,

der, whose industry or good fortune, whose merit, or perhaps whose guilt, has enabled his posterity to live useless to society, and to transmit to theirs their pride and their patrimony. However, this extravagant notion, this chimerical advantage, the effect of blind chance, where prudence and option cannot even pretend to have the least share, is that FLY which, by a kind of Egyptian superstition, custom all over Europe has deified, and at whose tawdry shrine good sense, good manners, and good nature, are daily sacrificed.

The vulgar distinction between people of BIRTH and people of NO BIRTH will probably puzzle the critics and antiquaries of the thirtieth or fortieth centuries, when, in their judicious or laborious researches into the customs and manners of these present times, they shall have reason to suppose, that in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, the island of Great Britain was inhabited by two sorts of people, some BORN, but the much greater number UNBORN. The fact will appear so *incredible*, that it will certainly be *believed*; the only difficulty will be how to account for it; and that, as it commonly does, will engross the attention of the learned. The case of Cadmus's men will doubtless be urged as a case in point, to prove the possibility of the thing; and the truth of it will be confirmed by the records of the university of Oxford, where it will appear that an unborn person, called for that reason, *Terræ Filius*, annually entertained that university with an oration in the theatre.

I therefore take with pleasure this opportunity of explaining and clearing up this difficulty to my remotest successors in the republic of letters, by giving them the true meaning of the several expressions of GREAT BIRTH, NOBLE BIRTH, and NO BIRTH AT ALL.

Great and illustrious BIRTH is ascertained and authenticated by a pedigree carefully, preserved in the family, which takes at least an hour's time to unroll, and, when unrolled, discloses twenty intermarriages of valiant and puissant Geoffreys and Hildebrands, with as many chaste and pious Blanches and Mauds, before the Conquest, not without here and there a dash of the Plantagenets. But, if unfortunately the insolent worms should have devoured the pedigree as well as the persons of the illustrious family,
that

that defect may be supplied by the authentic records of the herald's office, that inestimable repository of good sense, and useful knowledge. If this GREAT BIRTH is graced with a peerage, so much the better, but if not, it is no great matter; for, being so solid a good in itself, it wants no borrowed advantages, and is unquestionably the most pleasing sentiment, that a truly generous mind is capable of feeling.

NOBLE BIRTH implies only a peerage in the family. Ancestors are by no means necessary for this kind of birth; the patent is the midwife of it, and the very first descent is noble. The family arms, however modern, are dignified by the coronet and mantle; but the family livery is sometimes, for very good reasons, laid aside.

BIRTH, singly, and without an epithet, extends, I cannot possibly say how far, but negatively it stops where useful arts and industry begin. Merchants, tradesmen, yeomen, farmers, and ploughmen, are not BORN, or at least in so mean a way as not to deserve that name; and it is perhaps for that reason that their mothers are said to be *delivered*, rather than *brought to bed* of them. But baronets, knights, and esquires, have the honor of being BORN.

I must confess that, before I got the key to this fashionable language, I was a good deal puzzled myself with the distinction between BIRTH and NO BIRTH; and, having no other guide than my own weak reason, I mistook the matter most grossly. I foolishly imagined that *well born*, meant born with a sound mind in a sound body; a healthy, strong constitution, joined to a good heart and a good understanding. But I never suspected that it could possibly mean the shrivelled, tasteless fruit of an old genealogical tree. I communicated my doubts, and applied for information, to my late worthy and curious friend the celebrated Mrs. Kennon, whose valuable collection of fossils and minerals, lately sold, sufficiently proves her skill and researches in the most recondite parts of nature. She, with that frankness and humanity which were natural to her, assured me that it was all a vulgar error, in which however the nobility and gentry prided themselves, but that in truth she had never observed the children of the quality to be wholsomer and stronger than others; but rather the contrary; which difference she imputed to certain causes,

which I shall not here specify. This natural, and, I dare say, to the best of her observation, true, account confirmed me in my former philosophical error. But still, not thoroughly satisfied with it, and thinking that there must be something more in what was so universally valued, I determined to get some farther information, by addressing myself to a person of vast, immense, prodigious BIRTH, and descended *atavis regibus*, with whom I have the honor of being acquainted. As he expatiates willingly upon that subject, it was very easy for me to set him a going upon it, inasmuch, that, upon some few doubts which I humbly suggested to him, he spoke to me in the following manner.

“ I believe, Mr. Fitz-Adam, you are not, for nobody
 “ is, ignorant of the antiquity of my family, which by
 “ authentic records I can trace to king Alfred, some of
 “ whose blood runs at this moment in my veins, and I
 “ will not conceal from you that I find infinite inward
 “ comfort and satisfaction in that reflection. Let people
 “ of NO BIRTH laugh as much as they please at these notions;
 “ they are not imaginary; they are real; they are
 “ solid; and whoever is WELL BORN, is glad that he is
 “ so. A merchant, a tradesman, a yeoman, a farmer,
 “ and such sort of people, may perhaps have common
 “ honesty, and vulgar virtues; but, take my word for it,
 “ the more refined and generous sentiments of honor, courage,
 “ and magnanimity, can only flow in antient
 “ and noble blood. What shall animate a tradesman or
 “ mean-born man to any great and heroic virtues? Shall
 “ it be the examples of his ancestors? He has none. Or
 “ shall it be that impure blood that rather stagnates than
 “ circulates in his veins? No; ANTIENT BIRTH and
 “ NOBLE BLOOD are the only true sources of great virtues.
 “ This truth appears even among brutes, who, we observe,
 “ never degenerate, except in cases of misalliances
 “ with their inferiors. Are not the pedigrees of horses,
 “ cocks, &c. carefully preserved, as the never-failing
 “ proofs of their swiftness and courage? I repeat it again,
 “ BIRTH is an inestimable advantage, not to be adequately
 “ understood but by those who have it.”

My friend was going on, and, to say the truth, growing dull, when I took the liberty of interrupting him, by acknowledging that the cogency of his arguments, and the self-

self-

self-evidence of his facts, had entirely removed all my doubts, and convinced me of the unspeakable advantages of ILLUSTRIOUS BIRTH, and unfortunately I added, that my own vanity was greatly flattered by it, in consequence of my being lineally descended from the first man. Upon this my friend looked grave, and seemed rather displeas'd; whether from a suspicion that I was jesting, or upon an apprehension that I meant to *out-descend* him, I cannot determine; for he contented himself with saying, "That is not a necessary consequence neither, Mr. Fitz-Adam, since I have read somewhere or other of pre-adamites, which opinion did not seem to me an absurd one."

Here I took my leave of him, and went home full of reflections upon the astonishing power of self-love, that can extract comfort and pleasure from such groundless, absurd, and extravagant prejudices. In all other respects my friend is neither a fool nor a madman, and can talk very rationally upon any rational subject. But such is the inconsistency both of the human mind and the human heart, that one must not form a general judgment of either, from one glaring error, or one shining excellence.

XXXIX.

THE WORLD.

THURSDAY, April 17, 1755. N^o 120.

MOST people complain of fortune, few of nature; and the kinder they think the latter has been to them, the more they murmur at what they call the injustice of the former.

Why have not I the riches, the rank, the power, of such and such, is the common expostulation with fortune: but why have not I the merit, the talents, the wit, or the beauty, of such and such others, is a reproach rarely or never made to nature.

The truth is, that nature, seldom profuse, and seldom niggardly, has distributed her gifts more equally than she is generally