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Sketches Of The History Of Man

In Two Volumes

Home, Henry

Edinburgh, 1774

Sketch VI. Progress of flates from finall to great, and from great to small

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S K E T C H I V .

P R O G R E S S O F S T A T E S f r o m s m a l l t o g r e a t , a n d
f r o m g r e a t t o s m a l l .

When tribes, originally small, spread wider and wider by population till they become neighbours, the slightest differences enflame mutual aversion, and instigate hostilities that never end. Weak tribes unite for defence against the powerful, and become insensibly one people: other tribes are swallow'd up by conquest. And thus states become more and more extensive, till they are confined by seas or mountains. Spain originally contained many small states, which were all brought under the Roman yoke. In later times, it was again possessed by many states, Christian and Mahometan, continually at war, till by conquest they were united in one great kingdom. Portugal still maintains its independency, a blessing it owes to the weakness of Spain, not to advantage of situation. The small states of Italy were subdued by the Romans; and those of Greece by Philip of Macedon, and his son Alexander. Scotland escaped narrowly the paws of Edward I. of England; and would at last have been conquered by its more potent neighbour, had not conquest been prevented by a federal union.

But at that rate, have we not reason to dread the union of all nations under one universal monarch? There are several causes that for ever will prevent a calamity so dreadful. The local situa-
tion



tion of some countries, defended by strong natural barriers, is one of these. Britain is defended by the sea; and so is Spain, except where divided from France by the Pyrenean mountains. Europe in general, by many barriers of seas, rivers, and mountains, is fitted for states of moderate extent: not so Asia, which being divided into very large portions, is prepared by nature for extensive monarchies*. Russia is the only exception in Europe; a weak kingdom by situation, tho' rendered formidable by the extraordinary talents of one man, and of more than one woman.

A second cause is the weakness of a great state. The strength of a state doth not increase with its bulk, more than that of a man. An overgrown empire, far from being formidable to its neighbours, falls to pieces by its weight and unwieldyness. Its frontiers are not easily guarded: witness France, which is much weakened by that circumstance, tho' its greater part is bounded by the sea. Patriotism vanishes in a great monarchy: the provinces have no mutual connection; and the distant provinces, which must be governed by bashaws, are always ripe for a revolt. To secure Nicomedia, which had frequently suffered by fire, Pliny suggested to the Emperor Trajan, a fire-company of one hundred

* En Asie on a toujours vu de grands empires; en Europe ils n'ont jamais pu subsister. C'est que l'Asie que nous connoissons a de plus grandes plaines: elle est coupée en plus grands morceaux par les montagnes et les mers; et comme elle est plus au midi, les sources y sont plus aisément tariées, les montagnes y sont moins couvertes des neiges, et les fleuves, moins grossis, y forment des moindres barriers. *L'Esprit des Loix*, liv. 17. c. 6. — [In English thus: "In Asia there have always been great empires: such could never subsist in Europe. The reason is, that in Asia there are larger plains, and it is cut by mountains and seas into more extensive divisions: as it lies more to the south, its springs are more easily dried up, the mountains are less covered with snow, and the rivers proportionally smaller form less considerable barriers."]



and fifty men. So infirm at that period was the Roman empire, that Trajan durst not put the project in execution, fearing disturbances even from that small body.

The chief cause is the luxury and effeminacy of a great monarchy, which leave no appetite for war, either in the sovereign or in his subjects. Great inequality of rank in an extensive kingdom, occasioned by a constant flow of riches into the capital, introduces show, expensive living, luxury, and sensuality. Riches, by affording gratification to every sensual appetite, become an idol to which all men bow the knee; and when riches are worshipped as a passport to power, as well as to pleasure, they corrupt the heart, eradicate every virtue, and foster every vice. In such dissolution of manners, contradictions are reconciled: avarice and meanness unite with vanity; dissimulation and cunning, with splendor. Where subjects are so corrupted, what will the prince be, who is not taught to moderate his passions, who measures justice by appetite, and who is debilitated by corporeal pleasures? Such a prince never thinks of heading his own troops, nor of extending his dominions. Mostazen, the last Califf of Bagdat, is a conspicuous instance of the degeneracy described. His kingdom being invaded by the Tartars in the year 1258, he shut himself up in his seraglio with his debauched companions, as in profound peace; and, stupified with sloth and voluptuousness, was the only person who appeared careless about the fate of his empire. A King of Persia, being informed that the Turks had made themselves masters of his best provinces, answered, that he was indifferent about their success, provided they would not disturb him in his city of Ispahan. Hoatsang, the last Chinese Emperor of the Chinese race, hid himself in his palace, while the Tartars were wresting from him his northern provinces, and Litsching, a rebel mandarine, was wresting from him the remainder. The Empress strangled herself in her apartment; and the Emperor, making

making a last effort, followed her example. The ninth Chinese Emperor of the blood of Genhizcan, addicted to women and priests, was despised by his people. A person without a name, who had been a servant in a convent of Bonzes, putting himself at the head of some robbers, dethroned the monarch, and extinguished the royal family.

The Tonquinese, after a long subjection to the Emperor of China, regained their independence, and were governed by kings of their own nation. These princes having by long peace become indolent, luxurious, and effeminate, abandoned the government of the kingdom to their ministers. The governor of Cochinchina, being at a great distance from the capital, revolted first, and that country became a separate kingdom. The governor of Tonquin, within which province the King resided, usurped the sovereignty: but respecting the royal family, he only locked up the King in his palace; leaving to the King's descendents the name of *Bova*, or King, with some shadow of royalty. The usurper and his successors content themselves with the title of *Chova*, or Generalissimo; which satisfies the people, who pierce no deeper than what eyesight discovers. A revolution of the same kind happened in Japan. Similar causes produce similar effects. The luxurious and indolent successors of Charlemagne in the kingdom of France, trusting their power and authority with the maids of their palace, were never seen in public, and were seldom heard of. The great power of these officers, inflamed them with an appetite for more. Pepin and his successors were for a long time kings *de facto*, leaving to the rightful sovereign nothing but the empty name. Charles Martel reigned for some time without even naming a king. And at last Pepin the younger, ann. 751, throwing off the mask, ordered himself to be proclaimed King of France.

Montesquieu, discoursing of luxury in great empires, and ef-



feminacy in the monarchs, describes the danger of revolutions, from ambitious men bred to war, in the following words. “ En effet il étoit naturel que des Empereurs nourris dans les fatigues de la guerre, qui parvenoit à faire descendre du trone une famille noyée dans les delices, conservassent la vertu qu'ils avoient eue éprouvée si utile, et craignissent les voluptés qu'ils avoient vue si funestes. Mais après ces trois ou quatre premiers princes, la corruption, le luxe, l'oïveté, les delices, s'emparent des successeurs ; ils s'enferment dans le palais, leur esprit s'affoiblit, leur vie s'accourcit, la famille decline ; les grands s'élèvent, les eunuques s'acreditent, on ne met sur le trone que des enfans ; le palais devient ennemi de l'empire, un peuple oïfif qui l'habite, ruine celui qui travaille ; l'Empereur est tué ou détruit par un usurpateur, qui fonde une famille, dont le troisieme ou quatrieme successeur va dans le meme palais se renfermer encore * (a).”

Little reason then have we to apprehend the coalition of all nations into an universal monarchy. We see indeed in the history of mankind, frequent instances of the progress of nations from

* “ It was indeed natural, that emperors, trained up to all the fatigues of war, who had effected the dethronement of a family immersed in sensual pleasures, should adhere to that virtue of which they had experienced the utility, and dread that voluptuousness whose fatal effects they had seen. But after a succession of three or four such princes, corruption, luxury, and indolence, appear again in their successors: they shut themselves up in their palace, their soul is enervated, their life is shortened, and their family declines: the grandees acquire power, the eunuchs gain credit, and children are set on the throne; the palace is at variance with the empire, the indolent statesmen ruin the industrious people. The Emperor is assassinated or deposed by an usurper, who founds a new race of monarchs, of which the third or fourth in succession, sinking again into indolence, pursues the same course of ruin, and lays the foundation of a new change.”

(a) L'esprit des Loix, liv. 7. chap. 7.



small to great; but we see also instances no less frequent, of extensive monarchies being split into many small states. Such is the course of human affairs: states are seldom stationary; but, like the sun, are either advancing to their meridian, or falling down gradually till they sink into obscurity. An empire subjected to effeminate princes, and devoid of patriotism, cannot long subsist entire. The fate of all, with very few exceptions, has been uniformly the same. The governors of provinces, losing all regard for a voluptuous and effeminate monarch, take courage, set up for themselves, and assume regal authority, each in his own province. The puissant Assyrian monarchy, one of the earliest we read of in history, after having been long a terror to its neighbours, was dismembered by the governors of Media and of Babylon, who detached these extensive provinces from the monarchy. Mahomet and his immediate successors erected a great empire, of which Bagdat became the capital. The later Califfs of that race, poisoned with sensual pleasure, lost all vigour of mind, and sunk down into sloth and effeminacy. The governors of the distant provinces, were the first who ventured to declare themselves independent. Their success invited other governors, who stripped the Califf of his remaining provinces, leaving him nothing but the city of Bagdat; and of that he was deprived by the Tartars, who put an end to that once illustrious monarchy. The same would have been the fate of the Persian empire, had it not been subdued by Alexander of Macedon. But after his death, it submitted to the ordinary fate: his generals assumed regal power, each of them in the province he governed. Had not the Roman empire been dismembered by the barbarians, it would have been dismembered by the governors of its provinces. The weakness of Charlemagne's successors, hatched in France and in Germany an endless number of petty sovereigns. About the time that a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope was discovered, the great peninsula

sula



fula beyond the Ganges was comprehended under the powerful empire of Bijnagar. Its first monarchs had established themselves by valour and military knowledge. In war, they headed their troops: in peace, they directed their ministers, visited their dominions, and were punctual in rendering justice to high and low. The people carried on an extensive and lucrative commerce, which brought a revenue to the Emperor that enabled him to maintain a standing army of 100,000 foot, 30,000 horse, and 700 elephants. But prosperity and opulence ruined all. The Emperors, poisoned with pride and voluptuousness, were now contented with swelling titles, instead of solid fame. *King of kings*, and *Husband of a thousand wives*, were at the head of a long catalogue of such pompous, but empty epithets. Corrupted by flattery, they affected divine honours, and appeared rarely in public; leaving the care of their dominions to their ministers, and to the governors of their provinces. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, neighbouring princes encroached on all sides. In the 1565, Bijnagar the capital was taken and sacked by four Moorish kings. The governors of the provinces declared themselves independent; and out of that great empire sprung the kingdoms of Golconda, Visapour, and several others. The empire of Hindostan, once widely extended, is now reduced to a very small kingdom, under a prince who no longer is intitled to be designed the Great Mogul; the governors of his provinces having, as usual, declared themselves independent.

Our North-American colonies are in a prosperous condition, increasing rapidly in population, and in opulence. The colonists have the spirit of a free people, and are enflamed with patriotism. Their population will equal that of Britain and Ireland in less than a century; and they will then be a match for the mother-country, if they chuse to be independent: every advantage will be on their side, as the attack must be by sea from a very great distance. Being

ing thus delivered from a foreign yoke, their first care will be the choice of a proper government; and it is not difficult to foresee what government will be chosen. A people animated with the new blessings of liberty and independence, will not incline to a kingly government. The Swiss cantons joined in a federal union, for protection against the potent house of Austria; and the Dutch embraced the like union, for protection against the more potent King of Spain. But our colonies will never join in such a union; because they have no potent neighbour, and because they have an aversion to each other. We may pronounce then with tolerable certainty, that each colony will chuse for itself a republican government. And their present constitution prepares them for it: they have a senate; and they have an assembly representing the people. No change will be necessary, but to drop the governor who represents the King of Britain. And thus a part of a great state will be converted into many small states.

S K E T C H

