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An Essay On The History Of Civil Society

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Sect. VI. Of the Progress and Termination of Despotism.

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S E C T. VI.

Of the Progress and Termination of Despotism.

MANKIND, when they degenerate, and tend to their ruin, as well as when they improve, and gain real advantages, frequently proceed by slow, and almost insensible, steps. If, during ages of activity and vigour, they fill up the measure of national greatness to a height which no human wisdom could at a distance foresee; they actually incur, in ages of relaxation and weakness, many evils which their fears did not suggest, and which, perhaps, they had thought far removed by the tide of success and prosperity.

WE have already observed, that where men are remiss or corrupted, the virtue of their leaders, or the good intention of their magistrates, will not always secure them in the possession of political freedom. Implicit submission to any leader, or the uncontrouled exercise of any power, even when it is intended to operate for the good of mankind, may frequently end in the subversion of legal establishments. This fatal revolution, by whatever means it is accomplished, terminates in military government; and this, though the simplest of all governments, is rendered complete by degrees. In the first pe-



riod of its exercise over men who have acted as members of a free community, it can have only laid the foundation, not completed the fabric, of a despotical policy. The usurper, who has possessed, with an army, the centre of a great empire, sees around him, perhaps, the shattered remains of a former constitution; he may hear the murmurs of a reluctant and unwilling submission; he may even see danger in the aspect of many, from whose hands he may have wrested the sword, but whose minds he has not subdued, nor reconciled to his power.

THE sense of personal rights, or the pretension to privilege and honours, which remain among certain orders of men, are so many bars in the way of a recent usurpation. If they are not suffered to decay with age, and to wear away in the progress of a growing corruption, they must be broken with violence, and the entrance to every new accession of power must be stained with blood. The effect, even in this case, is frequently tardy. The Roman spirit, we know, was not entirely extinguished under a succession of masters, and under a repeated application of bloodshed and poison. The noble and respectable family still aspired to its original honours: The history of the republic, the writings of former times, the monuments of illustrious men, and the lessons of a philosophy fraught with heroic conceptions, continued to nourish the soul in retirement, and formed those eminent characters, whose elevation, and whose fate, are, perhaps, the most affecting subjects of human story. Though unable to oppose the general
bent

bent to fervility, they became, on account of their supposed inclinations, objects of distrust and aversion; and were made to pay with their blood, the price of a sentiment which they fostered in silence, and which glowed only in the heart.

WHILE despotism proceeds in its progress, by what principle is the sovereign conducted in the choice of measures that tend to establish his government? By a mistaken apprehension of his own good, sometimes even of that of his people, and by the desire which he feels on every particular occasion, to remove the obstructions which impede the execution of his will. When he has fixed a resolution, whoever reasons or remonstrates against it is an enemy; when his mind is elated, whoever pretends to eminence, and is disposed to act for himself, is a rival. He would leave no dignity in the state, but what is dependent on himself; no active power, but what carries the expression of his momentary pleasure. Guided by a perception as unerring as that of instinct, he never fails to select the proper objects of his antipathy or of his favour. The aspect of independence repels him; that of fervility attracts. The tendency of his administration is to quiet every restless spirit, and to assume every function of government to himself*.

When

* It is ridiculous to hear men of a restless ambition, who would be the only actors in every scene, sometimes complain of a refractory spirit in mankind;

When the power is adequate to the end, it operates as much in the hands of those who do not perceive the termination, as it does in the hands of others by whom it is best understood: the mandates of either, when just, should not be disputed; when erroneous or wrong, they are supported by force.

You must die, was the answer of Octavius to every suit, from a people that implored his mercy. It was the sentence which some of his successors pronounced against every citizen that was eminent for his birth or his virtues. But are the evils of despotism confined to the cruel and sanguinary methods, by which a recent dominion over a refractory and a turbulent people is established or maintained? And is death the greatest calamity which can afflict mankind under an establishment by which they are divested of all their rights? They are, indeed, frequently suffered to live; but distrust, and jealousy, the sense of personal meanness, and the anxieties which arise from the care of a wretched interest, are made to possess the soul; every citizen is reduced to a slave; and every charm by which the community engaged its members, has ceased to exist. Obedience is the only duty that remains, and this is exacted by force. If under such an establishment, it be necessary to witness scenes of debasement and horror, at the hazard of catching the infection, death becomes a relief; and the libation which Thrasea was made to pour from his arteries, is to be

kind; as if the same disposition from which they desire to usurp every office, did not incline every other person to reason and to act at least for himself.

considered



considered as a proper sacrifice of gratitude to Jove the Deliverer*.

OPPRESSION and cruelty are not always necessary to despotical government; and even when present, are but a part of its evils. It is founded on corruption, and on the suppression of all the civil and the political virtues; it requires its subjects to act from motives of fear; it would assuage the passions of a few men at the expence of mankind; and would erect the peace of society itself on the ruins of that freedom and confidence from which alone the enjoyment, the force, and the elevation of the human mind, are found to arise.

DURING the existence of any free constitution, and whilst every individual possessed his rank and his privilege, or had his apprehension of personal rights, the members of every community were to one another objects of consideration and of respect; every point to be carried in civil society, required the exercise of talents, of wisdom, persuasion, and vigour, as well as of power. But it is the highest refinement of a despotical government, to rule by simple commands, and to exclude every art but that of compulsion. Under the influence of this policy, therefore, the occasions which employed

* Porrectisque utriusque brachii venis, postquam cruorem effudit, humum super spargens, proprius vocato Quæstore, *Libemus*, inquit, *Jovi Liberatori*. Specta juvenis; et omen quidem Dii prohibeant; ceterum in ea tempora natus es, quibus firmare animum deceat constantibus exemplis. *Tacit. Ann. lib. 16.*

and



and cultivated the understandings of men, which awakened their sentiments, and kindled their imaginations, are gradually removed; and the progress by which mankind attained to the honours of their nature, in being engaged to act in society upon a liberal footing, was not more uniform, or less interrupted, than that by which they degenerate in this unhappy condition.

WHEN we hear of the silence which reigns in the seraglio, we are made to believe, that speech itself is become unnecessary; and that the signs of the mute are sufficient to carry the most important mandates of government. No arts, indeed, are required to maintain an ascendant where terror alone is opposed to force, where the powers of the sovereign are delegated entire to every subordinate officer: nor can any station bestow a liberality of mind in a scene of silence and dejection, where every breast is possessed with jealousy and caution, and where no object, but animal pleasure, remains to balance the sufferings of the sovereign himself, or those of his subjects.

IN other states, the talents of men are sometimes improved by the exercises which belong to an eminent station: but here the master himself is probably the rudest and least cultivated animal of the herd; he is inferior to the slave whom he raises from a servile office to the first places of trust or of dignity in his court. The primitive simplicity which formed ties of familiarity and affection betwixt the sovereign and the keeper of his herds

herds *, appears, in the absence of all affections, to be restored, or to be counterfeited amidst the ignorance and brutality which equally characterise all orders of men, or rather which level the ranks, and destroy the distinction of persons in a despotical court.

TO CAPRICE and passion are the rules of government with the prince. Every delegate of power is left to act by the same direction; to strike when he is provoked; to favour when he is pleased. In what relates to revenue, jurisdiction, or police, every governor of a province acts like a leader in an enemy's country; comes armed with the terrors of fire and sword; and instead of a tax, levies a contribution by force: he ruins or spares as either may serve his purpose. When the clamours of the oppressed, or the reputation of a treasure amassed at the expence of a province, have reached the ears of the sovereign, the extortioner is indeed made to purchase impunity by imparting a share, or by forfeiting the whole of his spoil; but no reparation is made to the injured; nay, the crimes of the minister are first employed to plunder the people, and afterwards punished to fill the coffers of the sovereign.

IN this total discontinuance of every art that relates to just government and national policy, it is remarkable, that even the trade of the soldier is itself greatly neglected. Distrust and jealousy on the part of the

* See *Odyssy*.



prince, come in aid of his ignorance and incapacity; and these causes operating together, serve to destroy the very foundation on which his power is established. Any undisciplined rout of armed men passes for an army, whilst a weak, dispersed, and unarmed people, are sacrificed to military disorder, or exposed to depredation on the frontier from an enemy, whom the desire of spoil, or the hopes of conquest, may have drawn to their neighbourhood.

THE Romans extended their empire till they left no polished nation to be subdued, and found a frontier which was every where surrounded by fierce and barbarous tribes; they even pierced through uncultivated deserts, in order to remove to a greater distance the molestation of such troublesome neighbours, and in order to possess the avenues through which they feared their attacks. But this policy put the finishing hand to the internal corruption of the state. A few years of tranquillity were sufficient to make even the government forget its danger; and in the cultivated province, prepared for the enemy, a tempting prize and an easy victory.

WHEN by the conquest and annexation of every rich and cultivated province, the measure of empire is full, two parties are sufficient to comprehend mankind; that of the pacific and the wealthy, who dwell within the pale of empire; and that of the poor, the rapacious, and the fierce, who are inured to depredation and war.

The

The last bear to the first nearly the same relation which the wolf and the lion bear to the fold; and they are naturally engaged in a state of hostility.

WERE despotic empire, mean-time, to continue for ever unmolested from abroad, while it retains that corruption on which it was founded, it appears to have in itself no principle of new life, and presents no hope of restoration to freedom and political vigour. That which the despotic *master has sown, cannot quicken unless it die*; it must languish and expire by the effect of its own abuse, before the human spirit can spring up anew, or bear those fruits which constitute the honour and the felicity of human nature. In times of the greatest debasement, indeed, commotions are felt; but very unlike the agitations of a free people: they are either the agonies of nature, under the sufferings to which men are exposed; or mere tumults, confined to a few who stand in arms about the prince, and who, by their conspiracies, assassinations, and murders, serve only to plunge the pacific inhabitant still deeper in the horrors of fear or despair. Scattered in the provinces, unarmed, unacquainted with the sentiments of union and confederacy, restricted by habit to a wretched œconomy, and dragging a precarious life on those possessions which the extortions of government have left; the people can no where, under these circumstances, assume the spirit of a community, nor form any liberal combination for their own defence. The injured may complain; and while he cannot obtain the mercy of government, he may implore



the commiseration of his fellow-subject. But that fellow-subject is comforted, that the hand of oppression has not seized on himself: he studies his interest, or snatches his pleasure, under that degree of safety which obscurity and concealment bestow.

THE commercial arts, which seem to require no foundation in the minds of men, but the regard to interest; no encouragement, but the hopes of gain, and the secure possession of property, must perish under the precarious tenure of slavery, and under the apprehension of danger arising from the reputation of wealth. National poverty, however, and the suppression of commerce, are the means by which despotism comes to accomplish its own destruction. Where there are no longer any profits to corrupt, or fears to deter, the charm of dominion is broken, and the naked slave, as awake from a dream, is astonished to find he is free. When the fence is destroyed, the wilds are open, and the herd breaks loose. The pasture of the cultivated field is no longer preferred to that of the desert. The sufferer willingly flies where the extortions of government cannot overtake him; where even the timid and the servile may recollect they are men; where the tyrant may threaten, but where he is known to be no more than a fellow-creature; where he can take nothing but life, and even this at the hazard of his own.

AGREEABLY to this description, the vexations of tyranny have overcome, in many parts of the East, the desire



fire of settlement. The inhabitants of a village quit their habitations, and infest the public ways; those of the valleys fly to the mountains, and, equipt for flight, or possessed of a strong hold, subsist by depredation, and by the war they make on their former masters.

THESE disorders conspire with the impositions of government to render the remaining settlements still less secure: but while devastation and ruin appear on every side, mankind are forced anew upon those confederacies, acquire again that personal confidence and vigour, that social attachment, that use of arms, which, in former times, rendered a small tribe the seed of a great nation; and which may again enable the emancipated slave to begin the career of civil and commercial arts. When human nature appears in the utmost state of corruption, it has actually begun to reform.

IN this manner, the scenes of human life have been frequently shifted. Security and presumption forfeit the advantages of prosperity; resolution and conduct retrieve the ills of adversity; and mankind, while they have nothing on which to rely but their virtue, are prepared to gain every advantage; and when they confide most in their fortune, are most exposed to feel its reverse. We are apt to draw these observations into rule; and when we are no longer willing to act for our country, we plead in excuse of our own weakness or folly, a supposed fatality in human affairs.

THE



THE institutions of men are, indeed, likely to have their end as well as their beginning: but their duration is not fixed to any limited period; and no nation ever suffered internal decay but from the vice of its members. We are sometimes willing to acknowledge this vice in our countrymen; but who was ever willing to acknowledge it in himself? It may be suspected, however, that we do more than acknowledge it, when we cease to oppose its effects, and when we plead a fatality, which, at least, in the breast of every individual, is dependent on himself. Men of real fortitude, integrity, and ability, are well placed in every scene; they reap, in every condition, the principal enjoyments of their nature; they are the happy instruments of providence employed for the good of mankind; or, if we must change this language, they show, that while they are destined to live, the states they compose are likewise doomed by the fates to survive, and to prosper.

T H E E N D.

