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THE TABLET.—No. XV.

"The wisest laws often become odious and useless, through the rashness, the vice, or the folly of those who execute them."

THERE is no propensity of the human mind, that is more constantly on the stretch, than a suspicious temper towards those, who take any part in the administration of public affairs. Though this disposition may be indulged to excess, yet its existence constitutes one of the safeguards of public virtue and prosperity. The clamors of restless men, and the vigilance of jealous ones, have no doubt an influence, in restraining public officers from an improper conduct. As men sometimes complain without sufficient reason, their complaints do not furnish a certain standard, for estimating the merit of persons in the different branches of government. There is less probability that instances of real misconduct will escape notice and censure, than that meritorious actions will escape envy and low intrigue. If it is acknowledged that part of the murmurs and uneasiness, that prevail against public men, originates in ignorance, caprice, envy, or in any other unreasonable cause, it would still be no conclusive argument, that public characters should be indifferent, whether their conduct was blamed or praised. It should at least produce this effect; that as they meet with much groundless reproach, they should be careful not to make themselves liable to any reprehension that is well grounded. Many honest and sensible men, who act in dignified stations, are so conscious that they meet with more censure and opposition than they deserve, that they are apt, by way of retaliation, to become petulant and disdainful. Sometimes they carry their feelings of resentment so far, towards unprovoked abuse and injury, that they afford a sufficient cause for the return of that very treatment, which they are retaliating. Disgusted by the meaness, and provoked by the malice and slander of their opposers, they unwarily assimilate themselves, by their mode of revenge, to the characters they profess to reprobate.

It is a question that may naturally be asked—What vices and failings, in the usual run of affairs, are most observable in the officers of government? This question admits not of an answer that is definite, and applicable to all situations. In different stages of civilization, there is a difference in the predominant vices and weaknesses, that attend all descriptions of men. The errors, that are observed in the first periods of a government, often have their origin in an ignorance or neglect of duty. During the late war, the principal losses and damage the public sustained, were owing to inattention and wastefulness. Few instances of deliberate fraud and peculation have happened, compared with the mistakes and omissions that have occurred, merely from the imbecility of the motives, that prompted men to a vigilant and exact performance of the diversified branches of their duty. It was not unusual to observe a store-keeper, who was minutely attentive in securing the property committed to his care, from theft or unauthorized appropriation; and yet who was totally remiss in securing it against the attacks of weather, or in counteracting any inherent causes in such articles to perish from their own tendency.

Once in particular, I recollect to have observed, a Commissary making application to the commanding officer of a department, for a guard of soldiers, to be placed over a magazine of flour. This Commissary expressed an anxiety in the business, that seemed to result from an honest desire to save the public property. He obtained an order for the guard, and placed it, without loss of time, over the magazine. The flour casks were without shelter, and in so bad repair, that a moderate storm of rain would so injure the flour, as to render it totally useless. It happened shortly that some rain fell, and in spite of all the sentinels, the flour was materially damaged, if not ruined. The Commissary could have prevented this damage, with less trouble to himself, than he took to obtain the soldiers; and the United States suffered more by that act of neglect, than they would have done, in six months, by plunder, at that magazine, even though there had not been a sentinel employed the whole time.

But that period is past. A new government is established, and an higher degree of civilization is attained; consequently we must look out for a different class of imperfections and vices. In the formation of the executive part of the constitution there is an admirable stimulus suggested, by increasing the responsibility of officers, from the manner of their appointment. This will overcome indolence, and make them attentive and circumspect in a complete performance of their duty, that they may gain the approbation of those, who

participate in the same feelings of responsibility. But are no disadvantages introduced by this arrangement? What are the inconveniencies of this species of responsibility, and how may they be remedied? Those, who are to be employed in the execution of the laws, will be responsible for their conduct in such a way, as will stimulate their exertions, and restrain their dishonesty; but as they are not accountable to their fellow-citizens, they will feel themselves released from the necessity of a civil, respectful deportment to mankind, and assume a pride and arrogance of manners towards all, who move in a sphere less elevated than their own. Such insolence of behaviour, may naturally be expected to result from the case, and it will be calculated to render the government odious, and to subject the laws to the imputation of being oppressive. I am far, however, from anticipating any sudden evils from this quarter. But as this is to be the vicious part of the character of officers sooner or later, it may be well to endeavour to ward off the evil, to as remote a period as possible. Perhaps no description of men whatever are so blindly ignorant of the true principles of human nature, as the various executive officers in an old-established government. If we critically examine the subject, we shall find that the leading cause why officers in general are so obnoxious to the people, and so many laws complained of as grievous, is, that such officers make it no part of their study to understand the various springs and operations of the human mind.

Every situation in life has virtues and vices peculiar to itself. Officers elected by the people can generally find an easier way of obtaining popularity, than the laborious task of performing their duty. They can promote their purposes better, by flattering the prejudices, than by serving the interest of their constituents. On the other hand, officers appointed by the Supreme Magistrate, can only gain his approbation, by a rigorous execution of duty. In accomplishing this object, they feel no responsibility to society in general, and are apt to neglect those common civilities, which one person usually expects from another; and which if they observed, would render them agreeable, and their office acceptable. In either of these cases, a man of a liberal and virtuous mind avoids the errors, into which, by his situation, he has a tendency to fall. A man well acquainted with the human character, and who possesses honest principles, may always perform his duty with fidelity and honor, and at the same time acquire estimation, for his amiable and civil deportment, from all classes of citizens.

An insolent, overbearing conduct may be compatible with the strictest integrity; but it argues either a weak understanding, or an erroneous education. Though a man of this cast may not himself connive at any frauds against government, yet his manners and conversation are so disgusting, that he raises enemies against the laws, and in that way, very often provokes fraudulent combinations. It is difficult to estimate precisely the evils such characters produce in society; but I believe a considerable part of the discontentment and knavery, that exist in any government, are instigated by the injudicious conduct of public officers. The people associate their ideas, in such a manner, as to imagine that the occasional mismanagement of individuals is a fault necessarily incident to government; and therefore suppose, that an evasion of law is justifiable, no less than opposition and hatred to those who execute the laws.

The present age is a period of experiment and improvement. It is easy for us to trace public disorders to their true sources; but it will be more difficult to apply suitable remedies. It will not be attainable to avoid such inconveniencies altogether; but when we know how liable they are to happen, it should induce us to guard against them, as far as may be practicable. For this purpose, it should be one circumstance to be considered in estimating the qualifications of public officers, whether they combine such properties as will lead to an able and faithful discharge of their duty, and at the same time, render their services not odious and contemptible to the people.—It may appear capricious to suggest the idea, but I think it will occur on a little reflection, that no man notoriously unpopular, should ever be employed in any important office. Though I acknowledge, that popularity is often connected with meaness and knavery; yet I have observed, that characters who are extremely obnoxious, are so defective, either in talents or prudence, as to disqualify them from acting in any station, with reputation to themselves or advantage to the community.

Many persons are so ignorant of the principles of human nature, as to imagine, that they can only discover an honesty and firmness of conduct by a captious temper, and a domineering deportment. It seems not to occur to such people, that

discretion should ever be ranked among the useful qualifications of a public officer. By this means, their virtues, and such good qualities as they really do possess, lose their beneficial influence.

If one were enquired of, whether the propensity of the people to complain of public measures without any cause was greater, than the liability of officers to give actual occasion of offence, it would be difficult to adjust an answer to the question. It is evident, that most of the clamors against public measures, do not proceed from motives that are pure and disinterested; but then, this malignity of motives is heightened by the ill nature and discontentment, which are excited by real mismanagement.

A SKETCH OF THE POLITICAL STATE OF AMERICA.

[Continued from No. XIV.]

A MERE description, or definition, of certain powers to be vested in a constituent body of men, has never yet been found to possess intuitively those effects, which answer the end and aim for which all power was originally delegated; nor has the most diffusive patriotism, operating among any people, towards the aid of Government, yet superceded the want of that encouragement to duty, which arises from the emoluments of office: But all nations have uniformly deemed it necessary to call for a portion of the wealth of their citizens, to establish and support Government in its various executive branches.—This fact being established, the most obvious reflection which presents itself is, how is this necessary support to be obtained with the greatest ease? And so as to bear most equally on the different classes of the people, and the various interests of the community? The varying practices of different nations, make the solution of this question in a degree problematical, and to depend on a combination of circumstances and causes, which it would require a volume to explore, and far exceeds the bounds of my present design.

I conceive the best criterion for us will be, to commence with an investigation of natural principles, and their corresponding effects, which an acquaintance with human nature, will enable us to develop, and as far as a detail of reasoning may be necessary, that we limit our researches to those cases, which apply best to the consequence.—It is to be regretted, that for want of a prior system on this subject, owing to our late unhinged and divided situation, we evidently feel the loss of those accurate data, and that complete information from the various parts of the Continent, which would subserve the most valuable purposes.—I shall venture a few ideas, on the proper mode of obtaining such information in future, in some subsequent paper.

We now come to speak of the most eligible plan, on which to raise the necessary supplies of Government—and shall here find it expedient to consult the peculiar genius of the American people, and some leading traits of the human character:—There is ever a prevailing jealousy among the mass of a free people, relating to the grants and appropriations of their pecuniary property: It will hence follow, that such a system of taxation should be adopted, as will, in its operation, touch most delicately this tender string; and that the objects, for which any assessments are made, should be regularly published, except in cases of war, &c. where the public good makes secrecy indispensable: Perhaps no people existing ever possessed, in a greater degree, that kind of jealousy above mentioned, than the Americans, and which in some instances, descends to mean suspicions: It will therefore be thought proper in forming the Revenue System, not only to have a regard to the interests which will be immediately affected thereby; but to the peculiar nature and genius of the people to be governed; let the "suaviter in modo" be adopted, but without losing sight of the "fortiter in re." The liberal, or rather loose principles of government heretofore existing in America, have been, and without the nicest hand in future directions, may continue to be opposed to bringing into action those great resources of national wealth, which are to be found, if explored. The native enterprise of Americans towards the extension of commerce, affords us a fair prospect of collecting an important share of the public revenue from foreign importations, if the tariff is levied with judgment; and perhaps for the present this will be considered the only source of national consequence: Foreign luxuries brought into this country ought to be duly noticed by our impost laws, as common observation and constant experience dictate the policy of taxing the passions of mankind, which may tend to good moral as well as political purposes, and is a species of taxation, which will be more cheerfully sustained, as men but little value any obstacles