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The Author in Conversation with a private Soldier of the Black Army on his Excursion in St. Domingo.
AN
Historical Account
OF THE
BLACK EMPIRE OF HAYTI:
COMPREHENDING A VIEW OF
THE PRINCIPAL TRANSACTIONS IN THE REVOLUTION
OF
SAINT DOMINGO;
WITH
ITS ANTIENT AND MODERN STATE.

BY
MARCUS RAINSFORD, Esq.
LATE CAPTAIN THIRD WEST-INDIA REGIMENT,
&c. &c.

"Trois, Tyriusve, mihi nullo discrimine agetur."

VIRGIL.

"On peut dire avec vérité qu'il y a peu de traits de barbarie qui
puissent leur (les noirs) être imputés."

DE CHARMILLY.

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CHAP. II.

Origin of the Revolutionary Spirit of this Period in St. Domingo.

The origin of principles is not always to be traced to the approximating causes of an event; for, as in nature, so in morality, the seeds of many productions lie dormant through varying seasons, till the moment when an unseen influence calls them into obvious existence: hence, to be capable of discerning the signs of the times, is a power that hath always been duly appreciated, and an attention to which hath frequently changed the fate of a country, if not of mankind. Yet, it is not often that man can be hoped to distinguish with precision, the approaching evil from the good, particularly in circumstances that affect, perhaps, not only his interest, but his immediate happiness; it is thus, therefore, that surprize is so frequently excited, at the apparent blindness to the future with which principles and practices are so frequently urged in society, diametrically opposite to the dictates of nature and philosophy, and repugnant to the common experience of ages. Collateral circumstances form the general argument...
ment in their favor; and it may endure with them a little while; but truth is eternal.

If accuracy of discrimination is not always to be found in philosophers, it is not to be expected in any large mixed body; and still less so, in those who form the population of colonies, particularly of the extent of that which is the subject of the present observations. Though the greatest empires have arisen from the overflow of cities into colonies, it cannot be contended that no feculence mixed with the flood.

To attribute to the general number of colonists any specific character, (where, collected fortuitously, they must necessarily admit of the strongest marks of variety), would be ridiculous; it is, however, certain, that among those, devoted to pursue fortune in distant dependencies upon their native country, may be ranked many who have no peculiar capacity, nor opportunity for employment at home; many of the higher classes without prospects, and of the lower without character; who cannot fail to consider their destination, as intended to supply every want; and to consider those means the best, which have the most facility. To those may, no doubt, be added many of the germs of genius, to whom, it is to be feared, the warmth of a tropical sun does not always prove more genial, than the wintry rays of their own; and, probably, some with qualities fitted for any sphere of life, to whom a spirit of enterprise alone might dictate the migration. To the self-interested, the term of his own probation will always bound
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bound his considerations, and it is not the bulk of mankind who can be, nor who incline to be, legislators, much less moralists. The officers of government may be able and good, but their dominion is too short to conciliate any local affection, and an expedient temporization will and must always supersede even ordinary virtue.

Of the West India colonists from France, the modern writers of that nation have afforded us no reason to think with increased tenderness, since Raynal has imputed to them a viciousness of conduct, beyond the apparent bounds of human actions; and De Chârmillly (one of themselves) has described those, of whom the best conduct was to be expected, receiving appointments under the government of the colony, as the rewards of an intriguing court to its meanest dependants, and vilest accessories! Their character, as displayed on prominent occasions, during that period which is the intent of these sheets to describe, unhappily was not often such as to controvert the assertions made from such good authority.

The man who first contemplated the purchase of laborers by thousands,* to be conveyed in close vessels, without the power of

* The commencement of the African slave-trade, like many other objects of importance, seems to have taken place from a very trifling accident. In 1440, Anthony Gonzales, one of the Portuguese navigators, in the prosecution of his discoveries, seized, and carried off some Moors near Cape Bojador, whom prince Henry afterwards ordered him to restore. When again exploring the coast of Africa about two years after, he executed this order, landing them at Rio del Oro, and received from the Moors, in exchange, ten blacks, and a quantity of gold dust. His success in this transaction tempted his countrymen to a repetition, till at length they fitted out ships for the purpose, and afterwards formed settlements for the trade in black slaves. Ultimately patents were granted, and the dealers in human flesh were sanctified by a bull from the holy see.
rest or exercise, or nourishment proper for any situation, much less for a dreary voyage to a foreign land; and, who knew these men, although little removed from a state of nature, to be susceptible of those impressions which mock the utmost refinements of civilization, to the attainment of some of which, morality often strives in vain; must have been bold to conceive that they would continue always patient of their wrongs, and resigned to compulsory labour, even though it should be in a state of comparative advantage, particularly in the constant converse of annual acquisitions of their countrymen, whose remembrances were not obliterated; yet no objection would appear to have occurred to him, and his plan proceeded till the employers of it, with a physical proportion of twelve to one against them, imagined themselves capable of coercing five hundred thousand of these men, exclusive of the descendants of others, without any determined exertion of virtue, or consideration on their own part.

Let it not be conceived that it is here intended to arraign the conduct of the planters in general, or to view with complacency the revolt of servants of any description, much less to plead their apology; I am but to state facts which are necessary to the argument intended to be produced.

The African negro is described as "frivolous, inconstant, vain, timid, jealous, and superstitious; yet good and generous, without foresight, always guided by the impression of the moment; and adding to these characteristics, the vices of slaves, indolence, gluttony,
tory, dishonesty, and falsehood; vindictive also, like all weak beings, injustice driving them to despair."* I take the whole of this character for granted, from the experience of the writer, and the different opportunities which have been confided to him of judging with truth. That the dependance of colonies, then, could have been originally placed upon such beings, was a strange perversion of human judgment; but that it could be expected to continue through ages, without a superior portion of human wisdom and virtue, (instead of a very small exercise of either,) is only attributable to the blindness I have just described. The result has proved the position; for, from the first moment at which African slaves were imported, the effects of all the bad qualities ascribed to them have been frequent, in revolt, treachery, murder, and suicide; nor, at the same time, have the instances been few, of actions arising from the superior impulses, or unconquerable affection, gratitude, inviolable fidelity, or bravery, have been experienced from them by their masters and connections; and circumstances are still recited that might cope with the history of the ancient republics. No more is described than is necessary to the present purpose; for it is not the wish of the writer to discuss the question of the slave-trade, already too much agitated in this country, but to trace the origin of the revolutionary spirit which has ended so fatally to the colonies of France.

Regardless of the frequent exercise of several minor qualities also which must tend to render men impatient of slavery, the labour of the islands continued to be performed by their means; without any other foresight, than related to expedients which might procrastinate the evil for each successive proprietor. Hence they have been successively punished by domestic means, chased as wild-beasts, combated like a foreign enemy, and treated with as independant powers! Yet, so prone are men to consider that what they wish the case, that scarcely a doubt was entertained of those who had not deserted, or marooned, nor were any other than coercive principles contemplated for those who remained; the same routine of purchase to supply deficiencies, and of regulations to secure their value, prevailed. The planter, instead of exhibitions of virtue and power that should impress respect and awe, appeared a feeble voluptuary, forgetting, in idle dalliance with the female labourers of his field, the utility of moral principles, and the decencies of life. The effects of such examples are incontestible, as regards private morality, without any allusion to the offices of religion; and it requires not to be depressed into a community of the most abject description of slaves to discover, that the effects of vice in undermining public virtue is the certain basis of revolt.

Thus an ignorance, in the first instance, of human nature, a blindness to actual circumstances, and a want of individual virtue in the colonists, gave birth to the revolutionary spirit in St. Domingo; which, instead of being created, was only fanned into flame,
flame by the occurrences which took place in the relations of the colony, with the mother-country, on the change of its government.

The support of colonies by means of such a disproportion of African slaves, to the other population as are necessary, continually and progressively acquired, is radically impossible, from the nature of the people themselves, and the manner of obtaining them; but if it were not, the want of powers required for their management—of a policy sufficiently subtle and yet enlightened, for their government, would render it, permanently, impracticable; even with both these probabilities in their favour, that, in such a depraved state as that of the French colony in St. Domingo, every other advantage would be annihilated.

It is, perhaps, necessary here to anticipate an observation not unlikely to be made; therefore, be it understood, that the impossibility of the continued existence of slavery is not by any means asserted. It is not forgotten that there was a period when, from the happy state under which I am considering this subject, unrestrained by the check of civil or ecclesiastical tyranny, parents sold their children as slaves to a foreign country, and inherited others themselves, who were their captives, or who had been acquired by other means; but these, notwithstanding they may have

* See an account of slavery in Europe in Robertson's Charles V. vol. I. p. 272.—Also an assemblage of the different laws on this subject, in Huntingford's Laws of Master and Servant Considered, chap. I. p. 36.
been treated as inferior classes of society (as the productive power is too generally to this day), bore no mark, by which they should be considered, as distinguished by nature to be scarcely belonging to the human species, as is the case with that of complexion.

Nor, is the writer at present opposing the practice of the slave-trade. He is an enemy to it, only, as he is to every employment which offers an undue power to many, not the most unlikely to abuse it; and as a principle hostile to humanity and inefficient in its purposes. He is aware, that the situation of colonial-slaves at present is, in many respects, superior to that of the labourers or the artizans of Britain. The first have not, indeed, the command of secession, neither have the two latter the power; for if they cease from labour, they cease from its advantages. When it is considered that the artizan must wander in search of employment, and submit to the optional reward of those who may chuse to employ him, after encountering distress in consequence of repeated refusals; the slave will appear more happy, though sometimes enduring corporeal punishment too severe, whose food and residence is provided without anxiety; and who is certain of employment, or of the same provision.

* It is recorded, but where I cannot, at present, refer, that St. Gregory observing some beautiful English children in the slave-market at Rome, exclaimed in a Latin pun, if I may be allowed the expression, that they were not English, but Angels, if they had but been Christians.—"Non Angli, sed Angeli," &c. This practice will, however, appear to have been continued after they had the benefit of the Christian Religion. See Anderson's History of Commerce, vol. I. p. 99.

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Nor, would the writer be supposed to sanction the means which have been used to procure an abolition of the trade, which he disapproves; much less, the emancipation of those slaves already in the colonies. Of the latter step, the humanity would be equally problematical, with that which would dictate the liberation of the poor bird long nursed in domestic comfort, to flutter a little while in solitary freedom, a stranger to his own kind, and to the winds of heaven.

What has been said, has arisen from a conviction that, but for the circumstances described, a revolutionary spirit would not have so soon been spread throughout St. Domingo; and to point out the beacon to the colonies of the British nation in the same sea, with that which has produced an illustration of these positions, and a picture so full of terror, on this more will be said, and with greater propriety, at the end of this work.

Flushed with opulence and dissipation, the majority of planters in St. Domingo had arrived at a state of sentiment the most vitiated, and manners equally depraved; while, injured by an example so contagious, the slaves had become more dissolute, than those of any British island. If the master was proud, voluptuous, and crafty, the slave was equally vicious, and often riotous; the punishment of one was but the consequence of his own excesses; but that of the other, was often cruel and unnatural. The proprietor could bear no rival in his parish; and would not bend even to the ordinances of justice. The creole-

slaves
slaves looked upon the newly-imported Africans with scorn, and sustained, in their turn, that of the mulattoes, whose complexion was browner; while all were kept at a distance from the intercourse of the whites. Nor did the boundaries of sex, it is painful to observe, keep their wonted distinction, from the stern impulses that affect men. The European ladies too often participated in the austerity and arrogance of their male kindred; while the jet-black beauty, among slaves, though scarcely a native of the island, refused all commerce with those who could not boast the same distinction with herself.

Such was the situation of the inhabitants of St. Domingo in the beginning of the year 1789, prompt to any movement that should create an effervescence among them, or afford the one party an opportunity of opposing the other; yet, while private feuds were eager for an opportunity to burst into public clamour, the situation of the country was such as hath been described, like the verdant bosom of a volcano, unconscious of the flame about to burst; the people were cheerful, the markets plentifully stocked, the lands loaded with production, and the colony, if "overwhelmed with debt,"* it may be admitted to be so said, flourishing everywhere.

In the mean time, the great kingdom, under whose care it had expanded to its present growth, and to whose government it yet

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* "la colonie qui, ayant encore beaucoup de dettes, n’avait pas besoin de payer celles de la France." *Lettre à Edwards,* p. 48.
looked for parental care, disordered by embarrassment, and agitated by conflicting interests, began to approach to that period which had been considered as inevitable, by philosophers, for more than half a century. Notwithstanding the absolute tyranny which had prevailed in other respects, France, under the feeble reign of the unhappy Louis, had been the nurse of morality and philosophy; and she drew nigh, not unwittingly, to that political mortality to which it would appear all states are subject; for it had been sung by her poets under the walls of her own capital, and repeated in auguries which did not err.

Of the different expedients that had been resorted to, the colonies did not want information; nor did it fail in the effect which might be expected upon every class of their inhabitants. In a new regimen the proprietors looked to some aggrandizement either in property or consequence; the free people of colour anticipated a favourable change in their condition; and even the slaves viewed, through the political alterations that began to occupy the attention of those above them, something to excite their curiosity, and a vigilance to gratify it. Each motion of the French court became canvassed by every class throughout the island. When a spirit of deliberation upon subjects usually considered above the capacities of the vulgar begins to spread, it seldom ends precisely as it begun; whatever may be the event, it does not fail to call into notice circumstances and opinions not easily repressed, and characters in their support who might otherwise have preserved through life "the noiseless

P  tenor
tenor of their way." It had its full effect in St. Domingo, already so ripe to receive it; and when the news arrived that the States-General of France were to be summoned (the last convulsive effort of expiring monarchy), all parties resolved on making their own interests a part of the general concern.

In opposition to the wishes of a judicious few (among whom was the intelligent De Charmilly) and even to the prohibitions of the government, the impetuous proprietors summoned provincial and parochial meetings, for the purpose of electing themselves to legislative functions; heated resolutions were passed; and eighteen deputies were elected, to represent the island in the meeting of the States-General, without any other authority than the noise of demagogues, and their own inclinations. Twelve were never recognized in France, and the other six were received with difficulty. The mulattoes, who could have no share in this self-created body, thought it naturally time to show an attention to themselves; and, accordingly, not only communicated with numbers of their brethren then resident in the mother-country, but augmented those powerful advocates in their behalf, with much more effect than was produced by the self-created body of colonial deputies. The negroes, however, more successful than all, without either deputies or intercessors, obtained, unsolicited, the interest of such a powerful body in their behalf, as to drown the recollection of every other object. A society, in which were enrolled the names of several great and good men, under the title of "The Friends of the Blacks" (Amis
(Amis de Noirs), circulated its protests and appeals with such vigour, that, before the negroes themselves, although eager and alert in their enquiries, were acquainted with the importance which they had obtained in the deliberations of the mother-country, they were the prominent subjects of conversation and regret in half the towns of Europe. They were not, however, tardy in acquiring this information; and though it would be difficult to contemplate any thing in human nature so bad, as to suppose that the highest and best of motives did not actuate so respectable a body as that which composed this society, or the similar establishment which had before obtained in London; yet the unhappy eloquence with which the miseries of slavery were depicted by them, and the forcible points of view in which all the errors of their opponents were placed, as well as the enthusiasm which always accompanies the exertions of ardent minds, were certainly the cause of bringing into action, on a broad basis, that spirit of revolt which only sleeps in the enslaved African, or his descendant, and which has produced on their side, and on that of the white inhabitants of the colonies, such horrors as "make ev'n the angels weep."

I conclude this account of the origin of the revolution of St. Domingo, with observing how much better it would have been for themselves, and perhaps for humanity, if happily discerning the signs of the times, the planters of this delightful and flourishing colony (a character which none have attempted to deny it), by resigning an overweening fondness for dominion, and an undue avarice.
avarice of gain, had rather calmed than provoked the dissentions of those whose interest should have bid them to agree; and by softening the evils of a state which is so bad in its best form, have conciliated the affections of those to whose labours, under the present regimen, every thing productive of wealth or prosperity must depend. A partial concession to those who, by complexion itself, claim half a right to political existence, would have been sufficient: with a little regard for the morals of a people who require them the most, and a revolution in their own minds, as far as human nature will admit. These would have preserved to them, now lingering in a melancholy exile, if not the sudden victims of their impolicy, an island the boast of the new world, and a powerful support of the old. If they had then contemplated some more legitimate means of prosecuting the labours of their colony, they might, however immediately unavailing, have laid a foundation for their posterity more lasting than the bequest of inordinate wealth, and have claimed the approbation of society.