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A sketch of the Character of Alexander Hamilton.

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A
SKETCH OF THE CHARACTER
OF
ALEXANDER HAMILTON.

“LAUDATUS A LAUDATO VIRO.”

Written by Fisher Ames Esq

Ἔ μάλ' ἰγρῆς
Ποσειδάγγελλῆς, ἔδ' οὐκ ὀφῆλλε γενέσθαι.
Κεῖται ΠΕΛΛΙΔΗΣ !

“ I have a message full of sorrow to deliver to you ; would it were not so ! — Achilles is no more.” *Hom. Il.*

THE following Sketch, written immediately after the death of the ever to be lamented HAMILTON, was read to a select company of friends, and at their desire it first appeared in the Repertory. It has been suggested by many, that justice to the memory of the deceased, as well as to the writer, require that it should receive the form of a pamphlet, for the convenience of binding it with those other valuable testimonials of grief and respect, which the mournful occasion has produced.

SKETCH, &c.

THERE are so many persons, who, from various causes, possess only a superficial knowledge of the character of eminent men, that, it is to be expected, the extraordinary marks of grief manifested by the publick, on the death of General HAMILTON, will to some appear strange and to others excessive. America, they may say, has produced many great men—some are dead, and others remain alive. Why then should we mourn, as if with a sense of desolation and surprise, for a loss, that, by the lot of human nature, has already become familiar; and why mourn so much, as if all was lost, when we have so many great men left.

But although General HAMILTON has, for some years, withdrawn from publick office to the bar, and has been, in some measure, out of the view and contemplation of his countrymen, there was nevertheless a splendour in his character that could not be contracted within the ordinary sphere of his employments.

It is with really great men as with great literary works, the excellence of both is best tested by the extent and durability of their impression. The publick has not suddenly, but after an experience of five and twenty years, taken that impression of the just celebri-

ty of ALEXANDER HAMILTON, that nothing but his extraordinary intrinsic merit could have made, and still less, could have made so deep and maintained so long. In this case, it is safe and correct to judge by effects. We sometimes calculate the height of a mountain by measuring the length of its shadow.

It is not a party, for party distinctions, to the honour of our citizens be it said, are confounded by the event ; it is a nation that weeps for its bereavement. We weep as the Romans did over the ashes of Germanicus. It is a thoughtful, foreboding sorrow that takes possession of the heart, and sinks it with no counterfeited heaviness.

It is here proper and not invidious to remark, that as the emulation excited by conducting great affairs commonly trains and exhibits great talents, it is seldom the case that the fairest and soundest judgment of a great man's merit is to be gained, exclusively, from his associates in counsel or in action. Persons of conspicuous merit themselves are, not unfrequently, bad judges and still worse witnesses on this point ; often rivals, sometimes enemies, almost always unjust and still oftener envious or cold ; the opinions they give to the publick, as well as those they privately form for themselves, are, of course, discoloured with the hue of their prejudices and resentments.

But the body of the people, who cannot feel a spirit of rivalship towards those whom they see elevated by

nature and education so far above their heads, are more equitable, and, supposing a competent time and opportunity for information on the subject, more intelligent judges. Even party rancour, eager to maim the living, scorns to strip the slain. The most hostile passions are soothed or baffled by the fall of their antagonist. Then, if not sooner, the very multitude will fairly decide on character, according to their experience of its impression, and as long as virtue, not unfrequently for a time obscured, is ever respectable when distinctly seen, they cannot withhold, and they will not stint their admiration.

If then the popular estimation is ever to be taken for the true one, the uncommonly profound publick sorrow, for the death of ALEXANDER HAMILTON, sufficiently explains and vindicates itself. He had not made himself dear to the passions of the multitude by condescending, in defiance of his honour and conscience, to become their instrument. He is not lamented because a skilful flatterer is now mute forever. It was by the practice of no art, by wearing no disguise, it was not by accident, or by the levity or profligacy of party, but in despite of its malignant misrepresentation, it was by bold and inflexible adherence to truth, by loving his country better than himself, preferring its interest to its favour, and serving it, when it was unwilling and unthankful, in a manner that no other person could, that he rose, and the *true* popularity, the homage that is paid to virtue, followed him.

It was not in the power of party or envy to pull him down, but he rose with the refulgence of a star, till the very prejudice, that could not reach, was at length almost ready to adore him.

It is indeed no imagined wound that inflicts so keen an anguish. Since the news of his death, the novel and strange events of Europe have succeeded each other unregarded, the nation has been enchained to its subject, and broods over its grief, which is more deep than eloquent, which though dumb, can make itself felt without utterance, and which does not merely pass, but, like an electrical shock, at the same instant smites and astonishes, as it passes from Georgia to Newhampshire.

There is a kind of force put upon our thoughts by this disaster that detains and rivets them to a closer contemplation of those resplendent virtues that are now lost, except to memory, and there they will dwell forever.

That writer would deserve the fame of a publick benefactor, who could exhibit the character of HAMILTON with the truth and force that all who intimately knew him conceived it ; his example would then take the same ascendant as his talents. The portrait alone, however exquisitely finished, could not inspire genius where it is not, but if the world should again

have possession of so rare a gift, it might awaken it where it sleeps, as by a spark from heaven's own altar ; for, surely, if there is any thing like divinity in man, it is in his admiration of virtue.

But who alive can exhibit this portrait ? If our age, on that supposition more fruitful than any other, had produced two HAMILTONS, one of them might then have depicted the other. To delineate genius one must feel its power. HAMILTON, and he alone with all its inspirations, could have transfused its whole fervid soul into the the picture, and swelled its lineaments into life. The writer's mind, expanding with his own peculiar enthusiasm, and glowing with kindred fires, would then have stretched to the dimensions of his subject.

Such is the infirmity of human nature, it is very difficult for a man, who is greatly the superiour of his associates, to preserve their friendship without abatement. Yet though he could not possibly conceal his superiority, he was so little inclined to display it, he was so much at ease in its possession, that no jealousy or envy chilled his bosom when his friends obtained praise ; he was indeed, so entirely the friend of his friends, so magnanimous, so superiour or, more properly, so insensible to all exclusive selfishness of spirit, so frank, so ardent yet so little overbearing, so much trusted, admired, beloved, almost adored, that his power over their affections was entire and lasted

through his life. We do not believe that he left any worthy man his foe who had ever been his friend. Men of the most elevated minds have not always the readiest discernment of character. Perhaps he was sometimes too sudden and too lavish in bestowing his confidence : his manly spirit, disdaining artifice, suspected none ; but while the power of his friends over him seemed to have no limits, and really had none, in respect to those things which were of a nature to be yielded, no man, not the Roman Cato himself, was more inflexible on every point that touched, or only seemed to touch, integrity and honour. With him, it was not enough to be unsuspected, his bosom would have glowed like a furnace at its own whispers of reproach. Mere purity would have seemed to him below praise, and such were his habits and such his nature, that the pecuniary temptations, which many others can only with great exertion and self-denial resist, had no attractions for him. He was very far from obstinate. Yet, as his friends assailed his opinions with less profound thought than he had devoted to them, they were seldom shaken by discussion. He defended them, however, with as much mildness as force, and evinced that, if he did not yield, it was not for want of gentleness or modesty.

The tears that flow on this fond recital, will never dry up. My heart, penetrated with the remembrance of the man, grows liquid as I write, and I could pour it out like water. I could weep too for my country, which, mournful as it is, does not

know the half of its loss. It deeply laments, when it turns its eyes back, and sees what HAMILTON *was* ; but my soul stiffens with despair when I think what HAMILTON *would have been*.

His social affections and his private virtues are not, however, so properly the object of publick attention as the conspicuous and commanding qualities that gave him his fame and influence in the world. It is not as Apollo, enchanting the shepherds with his lyre, it is as Hercules, treacherously slain in the midst of his unfinished labours, leaving the world overrun with monsters, that we most deeply deplore him.

His early life we pass over—Though his heroick spirit, in the army, has furnished a theme, that is dear to patriotism and will be sacred to glory.

In all the different stations, in which a life of active usefulness has placed him, we find him not more remarkably distinguished by the extent, than by the variety and versatility of his talents. In every place, he made it apparent that no other man could have filled it so well, and, in times of critical importance, in which alone he desired employment, his services were justly deemed absolutely indispensable. As Secretary of the Treasury, his was the powerful spirit that presided over the Chaos ;

Confusion heard his voice and wild uproar
 Stood ruled -----

Indeed, in organizing the Federal Government in 1789, every man of either sense or candour will allow, the difficulty seemed greater than the first rate abilities could surmount. The event has shewn that his abilities were greater than those difficulties. He surmounted them, and Washington's administration was the most wise and beneficent, the most prosperous, and ought to be the most popular that ever was entrusted with the affairs of a nation. Great as was Washington's merit, much of it in plan, much in execution, will of course devolve upon his minister.

As a Lawyer, his comprehensive genius reached the principles of his profession ; he compassed its extent, he fathomed its profound, perhaps even more familiarly and easily than the ordinary rules of its practice. With most men, law is a trade, with him it was a science.

As a Statesman, he was not more distinguished by the great extent of his views, than by the caution with which he provided against impediments, and the watchfulness of his care over right and the liberty of the subject. In none of the many revenue bills, which he framed, though Committees reported them, is there to be found a single clause that savours of despotick power ; not one that the sagest champions of law and liberty would, on that ground, hesitate to approve and adopt.

It is rare that a man, who owes so much to nature descends to seek more from industry. But he seemed

to depend on industry as if nature had done nothing for him. His habits of investigation were very remarkable ; his mind seemed to cling to his subject till he had exhausted it. Hence the uncommon superiority of his reasoning powers, a superiority that seemed to be augmented from every source, and to be fortified by every auxiliary, learning, taste, wit, imagination and eloquence. These were embellished and enforced by his temper and manners, by his fame and his virtues. It is difficult, in the midst of such various excellence, to say in what particular the effect of his greatness was most manifest. No man more promptly discerned truth, no man more clearly displayed it ; it was not merely made visible, it seemed to come bright with illumination from his lips. But prompt and clear as he was, fervid as Demosthenes, like Cicero full of resource, he was not less remarkable for the copiousness and completeness of his argument, that left little for cavil and nothing for doubt. Some men take their strongest argument as a weapon, and use no other. But he left nothing to be inquired for more—nothing to be answered. He not only disarmed his adversaries of their pretexts and objections, but he stripped them of all excuse for having urged them ; he confounded and subdued as well as convinced. He indemnified them, however, by making his discussion a complete map of his subject, so that his opponents might indeed feel ashamed of their mistakes, but they could not repeat them. In fact, it was no common effort that could preserve a really able antagonist from becoming his convert. For, the truth, which his re-

searches, so distinctly presented to the understanding of others, was rendered almost irresistibly commanding and impressive by the love and reverence, which it was ever apparent, he profoundly cherished for it in his own. While patriotism glowed in his heart, wisdom blended, in his speech, her authority with her charms.

Such also is the character of his writings. Judiciously collected, they will be a publick treasure.

No man ever more disdained duplicity, or carried *frankness* further than he. This gave to his political opponents some temporary advantages; and currency to some popular prejudices, which he would have *lived* down, if his death had not prematurely dispelled them. He knew that factions have ever in the end prevailed in free States, and as he saw no security, and who living can see any adequate, against the destruction of that liberty which he loved, and for which he was ever ready to devote his life, he spoke at all times according to his anxious forebodings, and his enemies interpreted all that he said according to the supposed interest of their party.

But he ever extorted confidence even when he most provoked opposition. It was impossible to deny that he was a patriot—and such a patriot, as seeking neither popularity nor office, without artifice, without meanness, the best Romans in their best days would have admitted to citizenship and to the Consulate.

Virtue so rare, so pure, so bold, by its very purity and excellence, inspired suspicion, as a prodigy. His enemies judged of him by themselves. So splendid and arduous were his services, they could not find it in *their* hearts to believe that they were disinterested.

Unparalleled as they were, they were nevertheless no otherwise requited than by the applause of all good men, and by his own enjoyment of the spectacle of that national prosperity and consideration, which was the effect of them. After facing calumny and triumphantly surmounting an unrelenting persecution, he retired from office, with clean though empty hands, as rich as reputation and an unblemished integrity could make him.

Some have plausibly, though erroneously, inferred from the great extent of his abilities that his ambition was inordinate. This is a mistake. Such men as have a painful consciousness that their stations happen to be far more exalted than their talents are generally the most ambitious. HAMILTON, on the contrary, though he had many competitors, had no rivals ; for he did not thirst for power, nor would he, as it was well known, descend to office. Of course, he suffered no pain from envy when bad men rose, though he felt anxiety for the publick. He was perfectly content and at ease in private life. Of what was he ambitious ? Not of wealth. No man held it cheaper. Was it of popularity ? That weed of the dunghill, he knew, when rankest, was nearest to withering. There is no doubt

that, being conscious of his powers, he desired glory, which to most men is too inaccessible to be an object of desire. But, feeling his own force, and that he was tall enough to reach the top of Pindus or of Helicon, he longed to deck his brow with the wreath of immortality. A vulgar ambition could as little comprehend as satisfy his views ; he thirsted only for that fame that virtue would not blush to confer, nor time to convey to the end of his course.

The only ordinary distinction to which we confess he did aspire was military, and for that, in the event of a foreign war, he would have been solicitous. He undoubtedly discovered the predominance of a soldier's feelings, and all that is honour, in the character of a soldier, was at home in his heart. His early education was in the camp ; there the first fervours of his genius were poured forth, and his earliest and most cordial friendships formed. There he became enamoured of glory and was admitted to its embrace.

Those who knew him best, and especially in the army, will believe that if occasions had called him forth, he was qualified beyond any man of the age, to display the talents of a great General.

It may be very long before our country will want such military talents. It will probably be much longer before it will again possess them.

Alas, the great man who was at all times so much the ornament of our country, and so exclusively fitted,

in its extremity to be its champion, is withdrawn to a purer and more tranquil ~~reign~~ .

We are left to endless labours and unavailing regrets.

Such honours Ilion to her hero paid,
And peaceful slept the mighty Hector's shade——

Our Troy has lost her Hector.

The most substantial glory of a country, is in its virtuous great men. Its prosperity will depend on its docility to learn from their example. That nation is fated to ignominy and servitude, for which such men have lived in vain. Power may be seized by a nation that is yet barbarous, and wealth may be enjoyed by one that it finds or renders sordid ; the one is the gift and the sport of accident, and the other is the sport of power. Both are mutable, and have passed away without leaving behind them any other memorial, than ruins that offend taste and traditions that baffle conjecture. But the glory of Greece is imperishable, or will last as long as learning itself, which is its monument. It strikes an everlasting root and bears perennial blossoms on its grave. The name of HAMILTON would have honoured Greece, in the age of Aristides. May Heaven, the guardian of our liberty, grant, that our country may be fruitful of HAMILTONS and faithful to their glory.