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[Ames, Fisher], 1758-1808.

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
Ποσειδ' ἀγγέλιός, ἔ δὲκ 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But although General HAMILTON has, for some years, withdrawn from publick office to the bar, and has been, in some measure, out of the view and contemplation of his countrymen, there was nevertheless a splendour in his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.

