

T O T H E
F R E E M E N
of P E N N S Y L V A N I A.

THE proposed extension of the Excise Law in this Province, has for some days been the subject of conversation in almost every company: And whilst some of you applaud the wisdom and public spirit of our Legislators, who promote the hazardous scheme, others do not scruple to condemn their want of foresight, who, regardless of the future welfare of their country, determine to fetter you with the most odious of all taxes.

For my part, I have always considered laws of Excise as the Hydra of corruption and slavery; and notwithstanding their very plausible introductions, view them in no better light, than cruel encroachments on the liberty of the subject, and most dangerous engines in the hand of power.

To answer the exigencies of this Province, to support its dignity, and to promote its improvement; to make the rich pay in proportion to their wealth, and to alleviate the burthen of the poor inhabitant, are the plausible and insinuating pretences of the intended imposition—Pretences, which give the lie to common sense, and which will impose upon those only who have no standard of their own to judge by; and who depend on the dicit of another, for the good or evil tendency of every public measure. Although it be granted, that a fund for the support of this government is immediately necessary, it does not therefore follow, that an extension of our Excise Law is necessary and eligible: For certainly other means, by far more safe, may be provided for that purpose; means, less burthensome to the subject, less injurious to trade, and which would be borne with much less complaint by you, who are bound to support government.

The poor, it is said, now pay an Excise, when the rich are exempted; and therefore, such an extension of our present law is necessary, as will make the burthen general and equal. This argument, if it has any weight, operates, in my opinion, against all Excise; and shews the necessity of abolishing the law now in force. For all Excise Laws heretofore have proved unequal; and by their very name must prove so for ever. But, in order to make the wealthy pay an Excise, the poor man must have an addition to his burthen; the trade of this Province must be subjected to much inconvenience and loss—bribery, corruption, and perjury, must be promoted, and venal bands of officers must be established, to execute, when occasions require, the sturdy measures of government. These, my Countrymen, are but few of the many evils concomitant with the proposed Extension. Excise Laws, once established generally, as they will be by the intended Act in this Province, will never be rooted out. They are by nature so destructively prolific, that every future Session of Assembly will teem with a new progeny, for whose preservation, myriades of spies and informers must be created; so that in time, you, my Countrymen, will be reduced to the miserable state of the slavish Parisians; to whom nothing remains free, but the air and the river Seine, which runs through the middle of their city: For there is a general excise upon all things that go into Paris, even to the very ashes, and old lees of wine.

In the Bill of Excise, now prepared by our Assembly, there is a clause to this blessed purpose. "That if it appears to any single magistrate, on the oath or affirmation of the excise officer, or his deputy, or any credible witness, that there is cause to suspect that any wine, rum, spirits, &c. have been made use of by any person, contrary to the intent and meaning of the Act, that then, and in such case, he may grant a warrant to the collector, who, with a constable, may enter any house, store, &c. wherein such wine, rum, &c. are supposed to have been made use of, contrary to the tenor of the Act, and break open, if he finds occasion, any door, closet, &c. in order to discover and detect offenders as aforesaid."

I do not suppose, that in the present day of harmony, and good neighbourhood, any improper use will be made of this dangerous power, invested in a magistrate; or that the law will be executed with so much rigour as to make us sensible of its dangerous tendency, before it be too late for us to obtain manumission.

The day of civil discord and dissention may however come upon us before we are aware; when every sinew of power may be exerted for the worst of purposes, and when the Bill, I now treat of, may prove the surest means of oppression.

The plan of a general excise will be effectually laid by the present bill; and so large a field will at length be opened for the vultures of excise to sport in, that our private dwellings may at any hour, either by day or night, on any frivolous pretence, be wantonly and cruelly violated; our families disturbed, terrified and abused; in short, domestic peace, that jewel of great price, will give us a mournful adieu, and our ruin will be compleat in the ruin of all public and private security. The parliamentary duty of 7l. sterling per ton on Madeira wine, was certainly intended by government as a prohibition of that article in America, and a discouragement to our foreign trade. If so what must we say of the prudence and public spirit of our Assembly, who co-operate with parliament in burthening our trade by an inland duty of 3l. 10s. currency per ton on the same wine. If it be said that the proposed excise is only intended to operate as a sumptuary law, and that the riches and luxury of this province require it; I answer, that if such regulations are necessary, it is time to reduce our trade within narrower bounds, especially the very ruinous trade to Great-Britain; and to impose duties on many other articles, than wine, spirits, &c. The latter we obtain in return for our wheat, flour, &c. which we could not vend at all times in any considerable quantity, unless those articles are received in part payment: So that every tax imposed on them must discourage their use in this province; and of course injure both the Merchant and Farmer. Now if it be true that our trade is too extensive, that the inhabitants of this province have enough of wealth, and that our country requires no farther improvement, it will then follow that every article of our trade should of right be taxed; and that wherever Great-Britain has imposed a duty on our imports, our Assembly should lay on another. But if on the contrary, we are as yet the industrious inhabitants of a young uncultivated province, and our trade; which is the foundation of every improvement of our country, be as yet in its infancy, and if the riches of this province, taken collectively, be scarcely more than sufficient to pay our heavy debt to Great Britain, we must be stupidly supine indeed, if we suffer, without murmuring, any act of Assembly to be fixed on us which, in its consequences, will injure our trade, and deprive us of the most essential blessing in life, a peaceful, happy and secure manion.

It may be thought by some persons that there is not much harm in the proposed Bill; and that guarded as it is against the wicked designs of officious Placemen, no evil consequence to the inhabitants of this province can possibly arise from it—But they will soon be convinced that the Bill, moderately framed, as they may now suppose it, will never answer the end of enacting it—To save appearances, and to conciliate the favour of the many, who most righteously were opposed against it, it received so much of the lamb's clothing, as was judged necessary to hide its native deformity. But this very covering will counteract its execution; unless some additional penal clauses be added, and at least a score or excise men in each county be appointed to enforce it. Nay all this will be found insufficient,—and nothing will secure it against repeated violations, but the making the officers of excise themselves judges of infractions; as is now the wretched case of Great-Britain and Ireland.

Others may believe that if such horrid inconveniences should attend the excise laws in this province, it will be no hard matter in future to have them repealed.—Strange insatiation! As if the caprices and cravings of government were like to decimate: For by this precarious tenure alone do we enjoy that so long hope of being happily rid of the burthen.—It moves us wanted by government, which will be the case so long as we have any government, they will never give up to sure a mean of fleecing the subject.—So that if there be any laws in the world that can boast of stability and immortality, excise laws of all others will in their point have the prebeminence.