

AN ORATION

DELIVERED JULY FOURTH, 1810,

BEFORE THE

Washington Benevolent Society,

AND THE

HAMILTON SOCIETY,

OF

THE CITY OF NEW-YORK.

—*—
BY J. W. BRACKETT.
—*—

THE NATION, WHICH INDULGES TOWARDS ANOTHER AN
HABITUAL HATRED, OR AN HABITUAL FONDNESS, IS IN
SOME DEGREE A SLAVE.

WASHINGTON'S LEGACY.

—
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1810.

AN ORATION, &c.

THE anniversary of our national independence, fellow-citizens, again calls us to unite with warm and grateful hearts, in purposes of political festivity.

The first colonization of the western world, but particularly of this part, to which all our attachments are fixed, is a subject full of interest. It presents a period rendered venerable by the bands of intrepid, christian adventurers, who laid the foundation of our republick. We turn the eye of retrospection and see how beyond parallel they multiply : the wilderness retiring before the force of their industry ; and vestiges of civilization extending rapidly along the haunts of the savage, giving presages of future greatness.

But the day we celebrate is the grand epoch of our boast, more interesting, more animating ; and to be ushered in, at each successive return, not with the cold remembrance of speculation, but with the fervour of the heart. The time now rises to mind, when the United States, having grown to the full stature of manhood, threw off the unnatural burthen of their allegiance. Long the subjects of foreign caprice, they had been amused on the one hand, with faithless caresses ; and galled on the other with intolerable oppression. Pushed to the extreme of forbearance, they arose like Sampson, young and vigorous, broke the new cords with which they had

been bound, asserted their rights, and declared their independence. As destined to stand an irreversible example in history, they chose the period best calculated to set in array all the noble qualities to be combined in national character. When oppressed, they had appealed to reason; they had animadverted; they had importuned. The last hope of respectful remonstrance was exhausted; when facing the sorest peril, buoyed by their own inherent magnanimity, they dared be free.

At the recurrence of this season, we would rejoice as men warmed with patriotism, but curbed by reflection. We would rejoice, not so much that we have gained a name among the nations of the earth; that we are free and independent; that we have grown prosperous, and rich, and great; as that we can look back to fathers, who ennobled themselves by their virtues; who triumphed by their intrepidity; who, dying, have bequeathed to us the inestimable legacy of their wisdom. Too soon have they left us to fraternal discord, in an unworthy contest, not for that legacy, but their wealth. They have ascended. Already we see them sparkling in their spheres; catching our admiration as we pass an eye along the radiant tract of their glory, where they form a constellation around Washington, the great luminary. How would we hail this day, how rich would it come to us in blessings, could we have confidence, that we, and our children, and our children's children, in endless succession, should steadfastly keep in view their bright example, and never decline from the course they would direct!

This is the time for a political lustration. We are naturally, and almost irresistibly, led to look into our annals. There we seek, not in vain, the best models for imitation; presented in well-wrought characters; instructing by salutary precepts, and in practice, still more impressive. We glow with the subject; and kindle as we pursue the inquiry....What are the maxims we should cherish? What are the characteristics we should strengthen? What are the dangers we should shun? What are the evils we should expiate? What is the true foundation on which to build our hopes? These questions spontaneously propose themselves; demanding the most serious deliberation.

The task is arduous; even experience might shrink before its magnitude. But could I now address you to my own satisfaction, I would speak such principles as Washington acted. I would not inflate your pride; but enlighten your understanding. You should not learn to be boastful; but to be brave. National folly should find no apologist; national imbecility no advocate. Your confidence should be drawn from your coffers, and placed in local resources and native vigour. Instead of contending about the honour and interest of other nations, we would learn to exercise our zeal in supporting those of our own. You should not be flattered for all the honours of modern duplicity; nor should the current of truth be restrained, by all the vengeance of your indignation.

In marking the short career of our country, it is difficult to say, whether the bravery, which achieved

our revolution ; the wisdom, which brought our government into being; the skill, which systematized its first movements ; or a preposterous and unnatural apostacy, is most conspicuous. Her early progress was fine, beyond example ; and the first honours as great, as even vanity could boast. But in the very dawn of our hopes, before youth had realized any thing more than the participation of passion ; reason not being so far developed as to triumph in the general welfare, the prospect was overcast, and our character, as a nation, plunged into disgrace.

It is, nevertheless, no difficult thing to riot in very obvious considerations of our peculiar favours and exemptions. We ascend, with ease, those eminences of comparative felicity, where we hold a commanding view of the various states and empires of the earth. They attract our attention as a landscape, just rising to sight through the mist of ignorance, which overshadows them. Their unhappy tenants are seen writhing under the tortures of cruelty ; and secretly breathing the deep execration against the relentless minions of arbitrary power. Asia lies in distant perspective, holding half the human species in slavery. The manacled captive, lacerated by the lash of the callous miscreant, for prostrate Africa excites the passing sigh. While we alternately eulogize and deplore, as we fix the eye upon Europe, varied with all the shades of pomp and misery. Disgusted with the prospect, and grieved at the hard lot of man, wherever we turn our eyes abroad ; we contract our views, with satisfaction and self-complacency, to our own country.

Here we admire the laurels won by the persevering valour of our fathers ; gaze with pride on the sacred temple of liberty reared by their hands ; and find no end in running over the immunities we enjoy ; either real, in the worthy achievements of our predecessors ; or fancied, in glittering professions, so profusely thrown out to amuse, dilating themselves as viewed through the medium of overweening imaginations.

All this, although it may be somewhat natural, is too often ridiculously extravagant ; and can only be commendable, when in a very moderate degree. But even the most temperate self-applause is not always safe. The propensity to it, as the example of our countrymen sufficiently evinces, increases with indulgence. Else, why have we heard so much fulsome encomium upon late passing measures and present prospects, where reason can see nothing but subjects for mortification and regret ? Else why do visions of human perfectibility, here to be exemplified, still haunt the imaginations of so many of our fellow-citizens ; although admonished of its futility by every passing occurrence ? Quietly to float down the current of nature, amused with the bubbles around, and confident of eternal sunshine and pleasant gales, would be as absurd in us, as in any other people. The greater our blessing, the more virtue is required to merit their continuance. The richer our inheritance, the more should we be upon our guard, lest it be torn from us in an incautious hour. Is it wisdom, then, to keep our faces to a pleasing point only, when danger may be lurking on

every side else ? No : vigilance is the best mark in the freeman's character: patriotism has the eagle's ken.

This season, therefore, which is emphatically the season for political self-examination and improvement, must not wholly be given up to mutual congratulation ; nor to a consideration of those deceitful appearances, which, contrasted with the well known miseries of other nations, might excite our pride. Should we set down to such a repast, we might arise, like the voluptuary from the surfeit: soon longing again for the gratification, and restless with desire ; but with faculties debilitated and impaired ; so as at each successive return, but to taste the banquet with diminished zest. For this, among other reasons, an eulogy upon our constitution and laws, a common theme on like occasions, is aside from my present purpose : our object is now their preservation. I have known men entertain us with enthusiastic applauses upon their structure ; while, at the same time, they were covertly engaged in undermining their fairest pillars. We will, therefore, take but a hasty view of the progress of our political concerns ; deducing such reflections as may be pertinent to our present state.

If we only derived credit in our revolutionary history from ourselves, the authority would be doubtful ; and candour would carefully review the facts, on which that credit was founded. But all nations have borne testimony to our honour : not suffering the breath of envy to sully it. Even our enemies, and the monarch, from whose crown our defection tore the brightest jewel, have been constrained

to bestow the merited plaudit. Recent as are the wounds of sanguinary war, England has done justice to our forbearance; to our bravery; to our resolution; to our perseverance. This she could not withhold; although she may never forgive the victory, and the triumph. To our enterprize and industry, she has, also, done justice; although she may always bend on us the jealous eye of rivalship in interest.

But, great as was the glory of American arms, led by the immortal father of his country; yet greater, because more rare, was the glory acquired by the quiet establishment of our constitution. This was not the adventitious effect of a singular genius; rising like the fabled phœnix, the solitary wonder of his age. It is not the edifice, reared from the ruins of more precious ancient monuments; and cemented with the blood of civil discord; carrying back remembrance to scenes of misery, which distinguished its era. The materials were collected by wisdom, from every part of the union: and a council of worthies, as wise master-builders, perfect in every department, prepared each piece of the complicated variety to its destined end: so that, like the temple erected by the wise king, it grew together in all the beauty of congruity, without the discordant sound of hammer or axe.

The first administration under this constitution can never be forgotten. How peace and industry, how bravery and public spirit went hand in hand! How happy were we at home; how respected abroad! How firm was every measure to the true

principles of government : how magnanimously open and unreserved in the developement of every circumstance affecting the interest of our country ! It was the administration of such a man, as we can never see again ! Added to his advantages of virtues and talents, intrinsic, and without alloy, he had the peculiar felicity of carrying all hearts with him. All with common consent united to bear forward the ark of our safety and hopes, under his auspices, and according to his guidance. Even those, who premeditated its ruin, found no means to effect their object, but by dissembling, and pretending to be his friends. Enemies he had ; for when were not the flagitious and designing the enemies of such a man ? Yet they were awed into silence ; and long kept over them that impenetrable covering of hypocrisy ; by which, since his departure, they have made themselves so ignominiously eminent. Sometimes they were detected in an act of malignity ; as in hiring an assassin of reputation to thrust at his fame : yet the point fell harmless ; or the brittle weapon was broken to atoms ; as mortal arms, clashing on immortal armour.

The succeeding administration was modelled on similar principles ; and merited, although we cannot say it has obtained, equal commendation. It exhibited more energy, and tended more directly to disclose the resources of our country ; merely, perhaps, because in our collision with foreign nations, there was more occasion for calling them forth. Commerce increased ; our infant navy became the admiration and pride of the seas ; our flag every where waved in triumph ; and the lawless aggressor, in

times more difficult than those which have lately shut up our ports, and beggared our cities, was brought to honourable terms. When insolent ambition attempted to intimidate us, no resort was had to embargoes and proclamations, to "quips and sentences, and paper-bullets of the brain," which, relied upon for defence, are the invariable harbingers of disgrace. But, when justice was denied, without waiting the experiment, how much dishonour a nation might bear without being ruined, we were told to command, and we did command, justice with our arms.

It was not the fault of the head, during that period, that intestine faction marred the best efforts of republican policy. On this occasion, there is no necessity for analyzing the causes, which then resulted in confusion. This is sufficient for my purpose; out of that confusion grow the wholesome fruits of experience. We are admonished by it, that a people can never have a government or administration so good, but that, if they find demagogues to lead them, they will always be looking for better; until, tired with changes, and consequent sufferings, they are forced to assume the appearance of content in despotism. It teaches also, what is of no trivial moment, the extreme danger of ruining a good cause, by suffering, interested bickerings among those, who pretend to be its supporters.

Thus far we advance, finding abundant causes of felicitation; notwithstanding certain unwelcome tokens of lurking danger. Enterprise had made our name conspicuous on every shore, where the footsteps of civilized man were to be found. Riches, more than the moderate desired, flowed in upon us;

and savage regions, receiving lessons of improvement from the commodities of our commerce, rendered in return the productions bestowed on them by nature, to increase our wealth. Public virtue was a reality. Popular fervour had not proscribed modest merit: nor was the candidate for office thought less deserving, because he worshipped his *God*, and had his heart harmonized by the benign influences of religion. Happy America! hadst thou known thy blessings; and hadst thou not been enticed to purchase experience by suffering! We look back on those times, as a traveller, who having passed through a country, rich with the choicest productions, and diversified with all the beauties of nature and of art, to please the fancy, or gratify the understanding, comes unexpectedly to a barren, dreary, and inhospitable land, which he is forced long and heavily to traverse, without a friendly lodge to invite him to repose, and without a single monument of taste or fertility to relieve the tediousness of the way.

New rulers changed the state of things. The ashes of our political saviour were scarce quietly inurned, when the government he had done so much to produce and to perpetuate, passed into the hands of its professed enemies: and his libeller was placed in his chair. Pity that the faithful historian must record it! It is not merely a stain upon our character; it is a foul blot. Yet let it stand. It will do the office of a beacon: it will warn the future pilot, and indicate the true course of our destination.

Who could so soon lead an enlightened and high-spirited people astray? Who could thus transmute the rich trophies of our national honour into all that is

contemptible and base? Backed by the profligate of the country, throwing all their efforts into craft, Jefferson came forward, the magician, who, by his incantations, turned the current of publick virtue; and reversed the hopes of a nation. The honest yeomanry did not become corrupt, they were deceived. He chanted a requiem to their fears; and gave an opiate to the understanding. Under the galling pressure of the enemy, he kept up a delusive peace: until the country was one loathsome wound of dishonour. But posterity will do him justice. Chronicled in infamy, his name shall be coupled with his characteristic; and no mention of him shall be made but as of the eminently pernicious: as of “Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin.”

But what shall we say of his successor? If he rises above contempt, he does not reach commendation. Yet I should do injustice to my feelings to speak disrespectfully of the first magistrate of our country. I would be the last to throw the smallest possible obstacle in the way of our administration in difficult times. It is far more consistent with the duty of a good citizen, to hold the lamp to lighten their slippery path. Each individual is a substantive part of community: bound at all times to contribute according to his ability, to the general good. However stubborn the nerves of others may be, I cannot be sensible of the smallest disgrace attaching to the head of our republick, but that I feel it at the heart. Nevertheless, I am constrained to say, that I involuntarily hold one in suspicion, who once apostatized for interest; whatever may be his subsequent indications of repentance. From the first, therefore, I considered that Mr. Ma-

dison had no demand upon us for any thing more than a silent support, when he was right. Yet contrary to my views, urged with all zeal within the small circle of my influence, we, who after his declension from the genuine principles of our federative system, were his natural opponents, gave him much credit upon trust; in which he abused our confidence, and disappointed our hopes.

Pressed by the thoughts inspired by this occasion, fellow-citizens, what further shall I say? Shall we look around, and from passing occurrences, form gloomy presages of the future? From present evils, which we all feel to be great, shall we fill our minds with forebodings of greater yet to come? Shall we speak of embargoes, non-importation, non-intercourse, and pigmy preparation, the offspring of treachery and timidity: nursed, caressed, and kept alive, as wretched little bantlings to shame their parents, by stubbornness and stupidity? Shall we view our country as insulted; yet continued defenceless? Ruined commerce; an empty treasury; bankrupt citizens! These are but sorry subjects of reflection! All this, however, might be forgiven: I could forgive any thing but national disgrace. Loss of interest is nothing. Let our millions go to the private coffers of the Corsican despot! It is the duty of republicans to bear privations. Let our commerce go to satiate rival cupidity. Let England mock our folly, and enjoy the harvest of our blunders. This in itself considered, might be forgiven. Poverty is no disgrace: and a character for wealth is not worth the labour of acquiring. The man whose sordid spirit does not rise above a calculation, is not worthy of

being a freeman. But to coop us up at home ; to expose us to insult after insult ; to let injury accumulate upon injury, until nothing is seen of publick character, but marks of infamy and dishonour ; it is unpardonable ; and may I meet my country's detestation if I ever forgive it !

I know it is excruciatingly painful to dwell on our case : yet bear with me a little ; it is as expedient, would to God I could believe it would prove as salutary, as applying the caustick or the amputating knife to the diseased limb. Let us throw aside party spirit ; and say.... Where is publick virtue ? Have we it ? Has it gone to our adversaries ? Does it sleep ? Or has it retired to some secret cell, where its influence operates only on some honest bosom, unknown to the world ? Athens annihilated the millions of Xerxes ; but with the same number of citizens, operated upon by the thunder of Demosthenes' tongue, she fell a trembling victim to the few veterans of Philip. What was the cause ? One of the most profound authors* tells you ; "She dreaded Philip, not as the enemy of her liberty, but of her pleasures." Her virtue was gone. What is our case, I beseech you ? Do we fear England ? Do we fear France ? Why do we fear them ? Because they can destroy our liberty ? Or because they will abridge our gold and silver, and interrupt our pleasures ? Do you believe men when they tell you, France can make you slaves : and that England can make you tributaries ? You do not believe them ; they are false : they are your worst enemies. Shame that

* Montesquieu:

any citizen of such a country should lisp it. Your fate does not depend upon any foreign nation under heaven. It depends exclusively on yourselves. Nothing but your vices can ever enslave you.

Then, fathers, brethren and friends! united under the most venerable earthly name; peculiarly bound to keep our characters pure, on account of him we claim as our patron:....this day, when our country stands on the precipice, agitated by disunion, and supported by weak hands....who will most intrepidly spring forward, divested of his prejudices, to save her from the fall? The farewell address of our departed friend will teach us what we ought to do. It is in our hands: let it be bound to our hearts; and every letter it contains be engraven on the tablet of the mind. Then we shall feel, that our constitution, our union, and our laws, are the triple cord of our political life; which broken, there is nothing left for an American. This day, therefore, we will bring our conduct to the scrutiny. We will examine our lives with the candour of honest men. Every offence against political consistency shall be expiated. We will draw more closely our attachments to our own soil: and teach our children above all things to love the land, which gave them birth. The day is dark and gloomy indeed! and, unless something is done to restore publick virtue, our hopes may sleep with the ashes of our ancestors. But revive, invigorate, sustain it:....and our national honours shall again flourish, fresh, luxuriant, and immortal!

FINIS.