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James Stephen

Excerpt

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TO THE

RIGHT HONOURABLE

HENRY ADDINGTON,

&c. &c.



SIR,

A STRANGER solicits your attention on a subject of the highest importance; a subject which requires from you, as Prime Minister of this country, early and anxious investigation.

The voice of advice to a Minister when public, is generally hostile; but I am not an enemy, nor will my purpose be found unfriendly: indeed an Englishman can hardly, at this hour, be adverse to your administration, upon principles that fairly belong to a lover of his country. Your claims on the gratitude of the nation, are undeniably great. You gallantly took the helm at a moment of unparalleled danger, and already we have weathered the storm: The dawn of your administration has been a rapid passage  
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from danger to security, from famine to plenty, from arduous and seemingly interminable war to peace.

Nor is it essential to the glory of this contrast, to assert that the merit of the transition belongs exclusively to yourself. While we ascribe to the bounty of Providence, the late exuberant harvest, and to its supreme and over-ruling sway, the whole deliverance, and while in the next place we fairly allow to your predecessors much of what your own candour ascribed to them as to the concluding triumphs of our arms, it will not be forgotten that the judicious use of means and opportunities, by which advantages have been improved into blessings, has been all your own. Neither depressed by calamity, nor distracted by difficulties, nor inflated by success, you have displayed in the management of the helm of state a wisdom not inferior to the courage and disinterestedness with which it was assumed.

With such a minister, the admonitions of the press may not be necessary to add to the native force of truth the influence of its publicity; but the subject to which I would solicit your attention, is one upon which the public mind is not, I fear, sufficiently enlightened; and the popular voice, which is in some cases a salutary controul, may in others be a needful aid, to the measures of a wise administration.

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Of the peace you have given to your country, the conditions do honour to your judgement. They have enlarged the bounds of the British empire and to an extent full as great as was either reasonable to expect, or prudent to require. Of the French conquests in Europe it would have been absurd to hope the restitution; and if there be any man who still thinks a larger portion of our own in distant parts of the globe ought to have been retained, he forgets the nature of those dangers which the war was so long prosecuted to avert, and to diminish which, as much as possible, was the British pacificator's most important object. He does not sufficiently consider that in the social, as in the natural body, extension is not strength; and that still more widely to disperse our much scattered energies, would have been to lessen, rather than encrease, our security against a rival force, formidable chiefly by its vicinity and its concentration: nor do such politicians remember that commerce is the best sedative for the restless spirit of a warlike people; and their transmarine possessions the best guarantees of their pacific engagements to the greatest of maritime states.

For my own part, I freely confess that, could we have obtained the cession of all our colonial conquests, I should have thought a Peace of such splendid acquisition, far less advantageous than the terms which your moderation has embraced.

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Cessions more extensive, could scarcely have been sincere ; and would rather have resembled jewels lent to adorn a victim, than genuine offerings on the altar of Peace.

But, it is useless to add the applause of a single voice to that chorus of approbation raised by parliament, and the nation at large : Nor is it the object of this address to justify the wisdom of the treaty, or throw new light on its advantages ; but rather to point out some serious dangers of which the peace, prudent and beneficial as it is, has unavoidably quickened the approach.

Already one of its consequences has strongly excited, and still fixes the public attention. No sooner were the ports of France released from the long embargo which our victorious and irresistible navy had imposed, than armaments of great magnitude began to be prepared in them ; and with such dispatch were they compleated, that, in little more than two months from the ratification of the preliminary articles, a powerful expedition issued forth, consisting, according to general and uncontradicted report, of 25 sail of the line, and 25,000 regular troops.

That St. Domingo is the place of destination of this very formidable force, we have not only the warrant of uniform rumour, but, if I mistake not, of official authority for believing ; but all beyond that point is uncertainty and anxious conjecture.

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What specific changes the armament on its arrival is to operate or attempt ; and whether its ultimate objects are safe or perilous, friendly or hostile to this country, are questions not less doubtful than important.

Like the Trojans, who sallying from their gates to enjoy their sudden and unhopèd for Peace, were soon arrested by the sight of the stupendous horse, we gaze with wonder on this great effort of our recent enemy, the post-humous birth of war, and as in their case,

Scinditur incertum studia in contraria vulgus.

While many are loud in expressing their rash approbation, and even exhort us to assist in fixing this portentous force in the colonial citadel, others suspiciously exclaim

—— in nostros fabricata est machina muros ;  
Inspectura domos, venturaque desuper urbi.

I hope, therefore, it will not be uninteresting, and am sure it will not be unimportant, to enquire, as I propose to do in the following pages,

First.—*What are presumably the objects of the French West India expedition ?*

Secondly.—*What consequences interesting to Great Britain are likely to result from it ?*

Lastly.—*What measures does the probability of such consequences demand from the prudence of the BRITISH Government ?*

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In attempting to ascertain in the first place, the true objects of this grand enterprise of the Republic, I will dismiss from the field of conjecture, as too improbable to be seriously received, the notion of a design *directly* and *immediately* hostile to this country. Such bare-faced perfidy would be too repugnant to the known policy of the Chief Consul, if not also to his principles, to be reasonably feared ; and it would be wronging your wisdom, Sir, and that of your colleagues in the Cabinet, to suppose that the expedition would have been allowed to sail unmolested, had you not been furnished with satisfactory evidence that his views were sincerely pacific.

As a necessary consequence of the same principles, I will presume that the French Colonies are the only theatre on which these armaments are designed immediately to act. “ But what enemy is to be combated there, or what political ends accomplished by the power or terror of the sword ? ” Here again opinions are greatly divided.

While some persons speak of St. Domingo as a revolted colony, that, like the United States of America, has renounced its allegiance to the parent state, and is therefore to be reduced by force to its former dependence, others appear to view the quarrel as a mere contest for power between Toussaint and Buonaparte ; and  
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to imagine that the question lies between the Constitution lately framed by the former, and the military government of the latter; between the Consul of St. Domingo, and the Consul of France.

Politicians of a third class, comprising, I believe, almost all who are well informed of West India affairs, carry their views much farther, and conclude that the true, though unavowed, purpose of the French Government in this expedition, is to restore the old system of negro slavery in St. Domingo, and in the other colonies wherein it has been subverted.

The last of these opinions appears to me by far the most probable; and I purpose to offer some reasons in its support. It is, however, requisite previously to state, generally indeed, and briefly, yet not without precision, what the old system of slavery substantially was, and in what points its restitution will alter the present condition of the negroes.

Without some accurate preliminary knowledge of the difference between these two states, we cannot properly estimate the probability of the supposed design, nor the difficulties afterwards to be considered, that will attend its execution.

That the true nature of West India slavery is very imperfectly understood in this country, may appear a bold proposition; but is one, which,

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which, from personal and long acquaintance with that system, and from ample opportunities of hearing the opinions prevalent in England on the subject, I am led with some confidence to affirm.

Neither the friends nor the enemies of the slave trade, seem to me to have attended sufficiently to that feature, which is in truth the most essential characteristic of colonial bondage, and chiefly distinguishes it from every other state of man, that is known to the traveller, or the historian.

“Are we then,” it may be asked with alarm, “are we to have new facts disclosed; and new contradictions to decide upon between the Abolitionists and the Planters?” By no means. The misapprehension I alledge, arises neither from the want nor the inconsistency of evidence; but from inattention to facts perfectly notorious, and never controverted or denied.

That West India slaves, whether French or English, are the property of their master, and transferrable by him, like his inanimate effects; that in general he is absolute arbiter of the extent and the mode of their labour, and of the quantum of subsistence to be given in return for it; and that they are disciplined and punished at his discretion, direct privation of life or member excepted; these are prominent features,



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features, and sufficiently known, of this state of slavery.

Nor is the manner in which the labour of slaves is conducted, a matter of less publicity. Every man who has heard any thing of West India affairs, is acquainted with the term *negro-drivers*; and knows, or may know, that the slaves in their ordinary field labour are *driven* to their work; and during their work, in the strict sense of the term, “driven,” as used in Europe; though this statement no more involves an intimation, that in practice the lash is incessantly, or with any needless frequency, applied to their backs, than the phrase “to drive a team of horses,” imports that the waggoner is continually smacking his whip. I use the comparison merely as descriptive, and not in censure of the West India system; with the accusation, or defence, of which, in a moral view, my argument, let it be observed, has no necessary connection. It is enough for my purpose, that in point of fact, no feature of West India slavery is better known, or less liable to controversy or doubt, than this established method in which field labour is enforced.

But a nearer and more particular view of this leading characteristic, may be necessary to those who have never seen a gang of negroes at their work.

When employed in the labour of the field, as, for example, in *holeing a cane piece*, *i. e.*  
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in turning up the ground with hoes into parallel trenches, for the reception of the cane plants, the slaves, of both sexes, from twenty, perhaps, to fourscore in number, are drawn out in a line, like troops on a parade, each with a hoe in his hand, and close to them in the rear is stationed, a driver, or several drivers, in number duly proportioned to that of the gang. Each of these drivers, who are always the most active and vigorous negroes on the estate, has in his hand, or coiled round his neck, from which by extending the handle, it can be disengaged in a moment, a long thick and strongly plaited whip, called a *cart whip*; the report of which is as loud, and the lash as severe, as those of the whips in common use with our waggoners, and which he has authority to apply at the instant when his eye perceives an occasion, without any previous warning.—Thus disposed, their work begins, and continues without interruption for a certain number of hours, during which, at the peril of the drivers, an adequate portion of land must be holed.

As the trenches are generally rectilinear, and the whole line of holers advance together, it is necessary that every hole or section of the trench should be finished in equal time with the rest; and if any one or more negroes were allowed to throw in the hoe with less rapidity or energy than their companions in other parts of the