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ORATION

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OF MARYLAND,

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President of the Society.

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ORATION.

THE revolutions, which have given birth to states, are justly considered as the most interesting events in the history of mankind. Intimately connected with the happiness of large portions of the human race, and marked by the exertions of the human mind, in almost every variety of situation, they afford us both instruction and delight. They present to our view the means by which great objects have been attained; the errors which have retarded success; and the pleasing spectacle of a people, enjoying in peace the fruits of its toils and dangers, and advancing with youthful vigour in the career of prosperity.

Among events of this description, none is more worthy of attention, than the birth of the American nation, which we are now assembled to celebrate.—The causes which led to it, the means whereby it was accomplished, and the consequences which it must produce, all concur to render it in the highest degree interesting, as a subject of historical enquiry, to the people of every country.

But to us it assumes an higher interest, and a more important character. It involves our dearest recollections and hopes; the sufferings and achievements of our fathers, our own rights, and the fate of our children.

It imposes on us duties of the most solemn and sacred nature. It teaches us in what manner they ought to be performed. By holding up to our view the high destinies to which it leads, as well as the benefits which it has already bestowed, it shews us what may be lost, by the neglect of those duties on our part.

And the considerations connected with this event, so awfully impressive in themselves, derive additional interest from the times in which we live. While governments and nations are falling in ruins around us; while, in a large portion of the earth, the very elements of civil society are threatened with dissolution; and almost every where the institutions contrived for promoting and securing the happiness of man, are swept away by foreign violence, or crushed beneath the weight of military despotism; it becomes us to recur, with heightened emotions of gratitude and joy, to the epoch of our independence; to recal to our minds, with fonder recollection, the blessings which it bestowed or secured; and to cherish, with more anxious care, the principles by which alone those blessings can be perpetuated.

What topics can be so proper for our attention, when assembled to celebrate the birth day of our nation! On what occasion can it be more fit, to recal the recollection of those blessings; to enforce the principles on which their preservation depends!

In casting our eyes over the long catalogue of our national blessings, we are most forcibly struck by the equality of civil and political rights, which exists among us. It is the feature, which most strongly distinguishes us from all other nations. In every other country, even those which have made the nearest ap-

proaches to free government, large portions of the community are destined to a state of inferiority and dependence, from which the laws, or the state of society, forbid them to emerge ; while on the other hand a few are raised to unmerited and unearned distinction. Hence the stimulus to laudable exertion is weakened in both : in one, by the certainty of obtaining without painful effort, the prize, which ought to be won by talents, industry and good conduct alone ; and in the other, by the impossibility in most cases, and the almost insurmountable difficulty in all, of removing the obstacles laid by the laws and institutions of the country in the way of success. In the privileged classes, also, a spirit of arrogant domination, destructive of all the milder virtues, is apt to be engendered ; while on the other side a character servile and submissive is produced, by the habitual sense and feeling of inferiority ; or the lower orders, from regarding those above them as their tyrants and enemies, imbibe towards them a ferocious spirit of suspicion, hatred and revenge, which being curbed and restrained from open indulgence by the force of the laws, rankles in secret, produces a character of dark and crafty malevolence, and, when the force, which restrained it is weakened or removed, often breaks out into the most horrible excesses.

While here, on the contrary, every citizen habitually and from his infancy, regards every other citizen as his equal. Hence a spirit of kindness and condescension in those who have obtained the highest places ; and a lofty independent character in all. Hence the utmost exertion of which the human mind is capable, in every department of life and of society ; each individual being sensible, that the prize for which he may

choose to contend, is equally within the reach of all who may desire to win; the highest, feeling that without continued exertion and good conduct he cannot maintain his ground, and the lowest, that with exertion and merit he may rise to the highest station.

As on one hand no man can hope to oppress, and on the other none can feel or fear oppression, neither a tyrannical nor a slavish spirit can be produced; nor is a sentiment of secret hatred and animosity, the faithful mother of cruelty, cunning and perfidious revenge, cherished in one part of the community towards the other. But every man, regarding his fellow citizen as his equal and his brother, is inclined to look on him with an eye of kindness, to cherish towards him sentiments of good will, and by complaisance and good offices to obtain his regard. Hence that universal kindness of manner, and readiness to oblige, by which all those who have travelled among the American people, without offending their pride by arrogant behaviour or airs of superiority, are so forcibly struck.

Next to this equality of civil and political rights, our attention is most strongly attracted by the equality of condition, among the American people. This is a phenomenon still more surprising than the former; a feature which still more strongly distinguishes us from the rest of the world. The facility of acquiring landed property; the independence in character and situation, which the almost universal possession of land produces; the general diffusion of comforts and conveniences; the ease and plenty in which all classes live; the healthy looks, chearful countenances and decent apparel of the labouring people; except in a few instances of disease, mismanagement or indolence, inseparable from

the condition of our nature ; the total absence of mendicity and petty theft, except in a few large cities, and their unfrequency there, form altogether a picture in which a philanthropist must delight, an American ought to exult, and which can no where else be seen.

Let those who long for the flesh-pots of Egypt ; who without duly estimating the advantages of their own country, are dazzled by the splendour of European courts ; who gaze at palaces and gardens and illuminations and processions and equipages and balls, and all the other pageants which float through the magic lantern of European society ; who gape with wonder at the history of an Emperor's marriage, the enumeration of his wife's diamonds, and the description of the dresses worn by her attendants ; let them turn their eyes to the general condition of the people in those countries, and learn a lesson of more wisdom and humanity. There they will see that the splendour of the few, which they so much admire, is purchased with the food, the raiment and the lodgings of the many.— They will see the labourer worn out with toil, reposing on a bundle of straw, or on the cold bare ground, after having divided with his half naked wife and children, the scanty and miserable meal, which forms their only repast. They will see his wretched hut, the abode of filth and vermin, without a candle to light it or a fire to dispel the damps, where himself, his family and his few domestic animals, if he should be so fortunate as to have any, are crowded together in a space hardly sufficient to give each room for extending his length on the floor : while the fruits of his labour are wrung from him, by a thousand oppressive devices, leaving him and his family just on the brink of starving, to support those pageants

which are so much admired. Even in the class above the common labourer, they will see a state, which in this happy country would be deemed wretchedness, but there is considered as comparative opulence. And in the towns, and especially the great cities, the seats of all this magnificence so captivating to their imaginations, they could turn their eyes in no direction, without seeing all around them human misery, in every form and of every degree. Approach one of those cities of whose splendid edifices we hear such glowing accounts; you find its suburbs and purlieus crowded with innumerable hovels, more wretched if possible than those already described, and inhabited by beings whose appearance excites still more disgust than commiseration. Alight at the gate of one of those palaces, or attempt to enter one of those stately public buildings, which look so beautiful at a distance, and you find yourself in a moment surrounded by crowds of wretches who solicit your charity by the exhibition of every form of misery, real or fictitious. Advance to one of those magnificent spectacles of which such dazzling descriptions are given. You find intermixt with the splendid equipages and sumptuous dresses, multitudes of half-starved, squalid, half naked creatures, waiting to catch some portion of the offal of the ceremony, or to provide for their wants by some petty depredation. Compare all this with what we see at home; throw the palaces the pageants and the splendour of other countries into the scale against us, and then let the wise and philanthropic mind decide, how highly we ought to prize the advantages of our country.

To be exempted from the necessity of engaging in the quarrels of other nations, and consequently of pre-

maturely burdening our infant strength, with extensive military and naval establishments, is another unspeakable advantage, which we derive from our revolution. That we should remain quite unaffected by the collisions of powers, with which we are obliged to maintain much intercourse, was not to be expected; nor does a wise policy permit us in the present, or indeed in any state of the world, to omit altogether the usual precautions for public defence. But our fortunate situation enables us to proportion our exertions to our means; and to avoid those premature efforts, which might exhaust our strength, and retard our growth, for a long time to come.

In the enjoyment of these benefits, and of many others, which there is not time to enumerate, we are maintained by free governments, founded on the principle of equal rights; and by an administration of justice in every part of our country, which, with some defects, is impartial, cheap and efficient. These are themselves among the greatest blessings that a people can enjoy; since without them all the others would speedily be impaired and ere long wholly lost.

And these advantages depend in their turn on national independence; which therefore, in the enumeration of our blessings, claims the first rank. It is but another name for self-government, the dearest privilege of man on earth. Though its importance must be obvious to all, yet our sense of it, which cannot be too high, may be very much heightened, by adverting to the necessary effects of foreign dominion, and to the situation of those countries, which groan beneath a foreign yoke.

To have their wealth lavished and their strength consumed, in the pursuits of projects foreign from their interests and their feelings ; to be taxed by foreign masters, who have no sympathy with their distress, no kindred feelings, no habits of kindness or association, no ties of connection or acquaintance, and are to bear no part of the burdens which they impose ; to be given up as a prey to rapacious and transient adventurers, who purchase in succession the privilege of unrestrained pillage, or receive it as a bribe or reward, and in either case employ it without pity or remorse, for accumulating as speedily as possible the means of splendour, luxury and boundless expence, in a foreign capital : to see their sons torn from their studies, their occupations, or from the arms of a youthful bride and the caresses of a tender infant, and driven to perish by disease or the sword in distant climes ; to be expelled from their houses, or forced to receive guests who convert them into menial servants : to see their wives exposed to outrage, and their daughters the prey of violence or seduction ; are some of the horrors which march in the train of foreign domination.

And the bitterest dregs in this cup of woe are reserved for those, who having once been independent, are reduced by fraud or force under a foreign yoke. Their masters, being strangers to them, have less sympathy for their sufferings. A state of violence and disorder, highly favourable to the perpetration of every crime, which the spirit of rapine, cupidity or lust can suggest, never fails to attend and follow the change. The fear of renewed resistance or future revolt, dictates to the conquerors the policy of completely breaking the spirit and the strength of the conquered, by every species of

severity and oppression. The dread of losing the acquisition often induces them to make the most of their possession, by stripping the conquered country, as fast as possible, of every thing that can be carried away. And to crown the whole, the miserable victims have their sufferings aggravated, by the recollection of their former state.

“ The thoughts of glory past, of present shame,
 “ A thousand griefs awaken at the name.”

Such is the picture of those wretched countries, which foreign fraud or force, aided by domestic divisions, by the jealousies the imbecility or the false policy of their governments, or by the pusillanimity parsimony or effeminacy of their people, has reduced beneath a foreign yoke. Such is the poisoned chalice which we too must drink to the dregs, should we basely or stupidly draw on ourselves a similar fate. And let us not forget that to us this cup must be tenfold more bitter, because of the numerous blessings which we now enjoy.

Nor let this be called a needless warning, founded on vain imaginations or groundless fears. We indeed are less exposed to danger than those nations which have fallen, but we are not beyond its reach. Let us not deceive ourselves. The causes which have ruined so many countries exist here. They exist every where. They are inherent in the nature of man. They have their root in his passions, and their growth is fostered by that very warmth, which administers life to the body of civil society. The means of counteraction also exist. They are in our power. If we employ them with timely and continued care we shall be safe. Otherwise this fair vineyard, the inheritance this day bequeathed to us

by our fathers, the fruit of their toils and the price of their blood, is doomed to become the prey of foreign spoilers. Instead of setting under our own vine and our own fig tree, with none to make us afraid, we and our sons are doomed to be hewers of wood and drawers of water, for insolent and rapacious strangers ; with no consolation left, but to moisten with the tears of bitter remembrance and unavailing regret, the scanty morsel left to us by our merciless taskmasters.

Oh my country, how my heart bleeds at the thought, that such may be the fate in store for the ! May heaven avert it. But if come it must, then when this arm can no longer be usefully lifted in thy defence, may these eyes close in the last ditch, before the mournful scene begins.

“ May I lie cold before that dreadful day,

“ Press'd by a load of monumental clay !

“ Thy son entomb'd in everlasting sleep,

“ Shall neither hear thee groan, nor see thee weep.”

But let us not indulge the frightful apprehension. Better hopes await us. Such calamities indeed do threaten us, and have befallen others ; but the means of averting them rest with ourselves.

Do you ask what are these means ? The answer is ready, plain and full. Adhere to the principles of Washington. His last parting admonition still resounds in your ears. Engrave them on your hearts. Adopt them as the rule of your faith and your conduct ; and unite vigourously with his friends and followers every where, in giving them a practical and general effect. Make them the pole star of the public councils, and the watch-word of the nation. “ Do this and ye shall live.”