

INTRODUCTION.

**HISTORIANS** of all ages have transmitted to posterity the dying words of expiring heroes; and related, with precision and with just praises, those memorable actions which so deservedly entitled them to that glorious epithet. It appears, therefore, extraordinary, that an Order ever distinguished for piety, military exploits, and wise form of government—an Order which had hitherto triumphed even in the midst of misfortunes—should cease to exist, and no kind pen, no friendly hand, be found to rescue it from oblivion.

Several different authors have described the laws and statutes of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem with great exactness, and have spoken of the virtues and valiant deeds of its members with equal strength and eloquence. Vertot, in particular, has thrown a light on the history of Malta which time itself can never efface:

and it is greatly to be regretted, that the man who has so forcibly described the religious and military actions of the pious personages and celebrated warriors who have raised the glory of the Order to so high a pitch, from the first moment of its institution to the beginning of the eighteenth century, should no longer exist, to record the fatal events which have so cruelly annihilated it. He alone could do justice to Malta, render the last honours to her memory, and throw over her the funereal pall; which, it is much to be dreaded, will never be removed.

How truly should I value and admire the pen which could trace to posterity, and to the whole Christian world, the sentiments of affection and esteem felt for the knights of Malta by the surrounding nations!—sentiments so justly due to their hospitality and military prowess, and of which the inhabitants of Calabria and Sicily must most particularly partake\*. To them, indeed, I may with justice appeal, since by them the hospitable virtues of the knights of St. John can never be forgotten. Neither the severity of the weather, nor the passage through the Faro of Messina, which at the season of the year when the earthquake happened is extremely dangerous, could abate the zeal of the Order: and, notwithstanding

\* See the account of the earthquake in Calabria and Sicily, and the relief afforded the inhabitants by the knights of Malta, Vol. III. p. 12.

the galleys were laid up for the winter, preparations were so quickly made, that, thirty-six hours after the arrival of the dreadful intelligence, they set sail for Sicily, carrying with them medicine-chests, tents, beds, surgeons—in short, every thing necessary for fitting up an hospital.

The standard of St. John floating in the air, was the first signal of relief perceived by these miserable sufferers; and the knights of Malta eagerly flew to alleviate their distress. They distributed among them every thing requisite to supply the exigence of the moment; and thousands of people on the Quay of Messina daily received provisions from their hands. How affecting was the scene, to behold these same knights, accompanied by the surgeons, searching among the ruins, and rescuing from destruction the unhappy beings who were buried beneath them, and whose wounds prevented their making any efforts for themselves! They next proceeded to the miserable dwellings scattered over the fields, in which some of these wretched sufferers had sought an asylum, whilst others, still more wretched, were stretched on the ground, where I myself beheld them, bathed in their blood. To these likewise the knights administered relief, and even applied the first dressing to their wounds; thus affording that assistance which the unfortunate victims had vainly implored from their fellow-citizens.

During the whole of their stay on this desolated shore, they continued their pious occupations, and found means to shelter, from the inclemency of the weather, numbers of beings who had been reduced to rest their weary limbs on the cold bosom of their mother earth.

If such, then, were the hospitable virtues of the knights of St. John, their military exploits were surely equally conspicuous! How easily could I point out the memorable and recent periods when the Maltese galleys and men-of-war so gloriously combated, in the post of honour on the African Sea, in the midst of the Christian fleets, when they threatened with destruction the coast of Barbary, and spread universal terror to the very walls of Algiers! But I will leave to others this wide field of glory, and confine myself, in the following pages, to a slight sketch of the history of the knights of St. John, from their first establishment in the island of Malta till the fatal moment when they were so cruelly forced to abandon it.

How frequently shall I regret, in this rapid account of the memorable exploits of the heroes who have done honour to Malta, the impossibility of placing before the reader the names of all those whose actions have obtained the prize of immortality, and

who must ever live in the memory of their successors! The barbarians who have defiled, mutilated, and laid waste the monuments erected in remembrance of their virtues by the hand of Piety and Gratitude, have, if possible, added to their shame, and rendered the memory of these heroes still more dear, by proving to mankind how necessary are the services of such warriors to free the world from those detestable monsters. The noble sarcophagi, the rich tombs which decorated the church of St. John, where the magnificent efforts of art seemed exhausted, ought to have entitled the knights to the respect and veneration of even these destroyers. All, all have been overthrown—mercilessly broken—and their contents dispersed! Who knows, but, in some future day, the precious remains of La Valette and L'Isle Adam may be found in the same place into which those of Turenne have been thrown! and who knows, but they may likewise receive the same honours which are now so eagerly paid to the memory of that great general!\*

How cruelly painful must be the reflexions of a conqueror, the lover of true glory and the fine arts, who, intoxicated with

\* I have just learned, that every thing which was not of gold, silver, or precious stones, has been respected: I therefore think it proper to do immediate justice, in that particular, to the scrupulous executors of the orders of the directory.

success, has suffered the laurels of victory to be planted in the midst of heaps of rubbish, the sad remains of fallen edifices! Alas! the faded state of those laurels must quickly convince him of his error, and serve as a severe lesson on future occasions. The ruins of Persepolis are to this day an indelible stain on the memory of him who vainly hoped to make amends for the destruction of that city by laying the foundation of Alexandria, where the invaders of the present day have fruitlessly sought the monuments of ancient times, and carried their ambition so far as to attempt re-building its walls. Arts once lost cannot be restored; since those which flourished in one century can never equally suit the taste of another.

I can never sufficiently regret, that I should be compelled, in the course of this history, to place, in the same page with the most illustrious personages who have honoured the Order, names (though happily but few in number) which ought for ever to be proscribed. The history of their crimes will serve as a striking instance of the frailty of human nature, which yields to temptation even in presence of the most sublime virtue.

And you, illustrious, religious dames! who, after the example of the original hospitallers of St. John, have devoted yourselves to

the relief of the poor and sick of your own sex, think not I will pass over in silence your distinguished virtues ! It may, perhaps, be asked, why you, who are associated with the hospitallers, who have regarded them as your superiors, and have always accompanied them, have never, equally with themselves, had historians to publish those heroic and charitable deeds which, in whatsoever countries you have been dispersed, have so deservedly obtained the admiration of the rich and the blessings of the poor ? The reason, alas ! is clear ; since the peaceful and secret virtues of religion and charity offer nothing interesting to a corrupted world, which demands brilliant acts of valour to arrest its attention—acts but too frequently stained with blood, which your tender hands have stanchèd in silence. Your glory, like that of the God whose example you follow, is not of this world. If, indeed, it subsists any where in all its purity, it must be in the breasts of those who practise the same virtues ; of those who owe their existence to your charitable care, and who, like you, look up to the joys of another life, to console them for the transitory troubles of this.

Let the curious reader now proceed to examine the origin of hospitals, and he will evidently perceive, that the admirable institutions, founded by the true spirit of charity for the relief of suffering humanity, where the poor found an asylum, and the sick were

snatched from the jaws of death, were not the work of Pagan hands. The legislators and philosophers of the heathen world preached no such doctrine; for the gods worshipped by idolaters breathed nothing but battle and vengeance, and delivered themselves up to all the disorderly passions of men. For one simple altar raised to Benevolence, more than a hundred magnificent temples were erected in honour of Venus.

Rome, whilst plunged in the dark abyss of idolatry—nay, even Greece herself, so renowned for wise laws and sublime institutions—could never boast of either law or institution dedicated to the relief of miserable humanity. And ye, pious Numa! wise Solon! virtuous Lycurgus! why, O why did ye forget, in the midst of so many religious establishments, that which, doubtless, must ever be the most pleasing to the Divinity—an asylum for the sick and dying!

How glorious would it be for the academies, lyceums, and porticoes, of Pagan philosophy, which have given to the world so many illustrious personages worthy of admiration, could I present to my reader only one of the disciples of that philosophy, who, on quitting its schools, had given freedom to his slaves, or commanded them to stretch out a pitying hand to relieve the distress



of an unfortunate being sinking before them under the accumulated weight of indigence and infirmities !

The most enlightened part of mankind, in those distant ages, was almost equally divided into two sects of philosophers. But what efforts of humanity could be expected, either from the Stoics, who, taught to despise pain and misery in their own persons, were naturally insensible to the sufferings of others, or from the followers of Epicurus, whose happiness consisted in the successive enjoyment of sensual pleasures, which the spectacle of an unfortunate fellow-creature would have only served to interrupt ?

Neither do the boasted religion and government of China or India, offer any asylum to either master or slave, reduced to poverty or suffering from sickness. Those, indeed, who believed in the metempsychosis, erected hospitals for animals, into which even the most impure were received : man alone was forgotten.

It was, then, reserved for Christianity to shed its benign influence around, and bestow this new blessing on a suffering world. To the honour of the female sex let it be said, that a woman was the first founder of such a pious institution in the capital of the world.

The affecting spectacle of a God expiring on a cross for the salvation of all mankind, who, in his dying moments, even forgave his executioners—his disciples constantly preaching the duty of loving our neighbour as ourselves—the doctrine of the Gospel, which proves that all men are equal in the eyes of their Creator—must naturally revive in the human breast that sensibility so long stifled by the erroneous tenets of idolatrous lawgivers and philosophers.

Fabiola\*, a Roman lady, moved by the tears and groans of the wounded and dying mercilessly left extended in the public squares of the city, felt, from the principles of her religion, that it was the duty of the rich in this world to alleviate the distress of the suffering poor, and afford them shelter in their misfortunes; she therefore instantly devoted her immense fortune to the construction of a spacious edifice, in a healthy situation, for the reception of the sick and infirm, where they were supplied with proper food, and every possible assistance.

The Christian emperors in the East likewise vied with each other in establishing houses on the same plan. Constantinople alone soon contained thirty-five charitable institutions, in which the

\* See *Encyclopédie Méthodique*, Art. *Hôpital*.

poor and sick of all descriptions were received, and their necessities relieved.

The hospital of St. John existed in Jerusalem from the reign of Justinian. It was principally intended for the reception of strangers, and the great crowds of pilgrims who constantly thronged from all parts to visit the Holy Sepulchre: it afterwards became a nursery for the knights of Malta; and the time they passed in that place may well be regarded as the golden age of their history.

I do not intend, in this work, to write the history of those primitive times, nor of the knights of St. John, afterwards knights of Rhodes; I shall only present to my reader a chronological historical table\*, with observations, of the principal events which took place in the reigns of the successive grand-masters, from the time of Gerard till the epoch when L'Isle Adam was obliged to abandon Rhodes. I have corrected the dates of several facts, which were erroneous in most of the ancient authors who have treated of the Order, and taken notice of other mistakes, which, from never having been rectified, had glided into the works of more modern historians.

\* Intended to make part of a complete history of Malta, about which I have for some time past been employed.

