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Miscellaneous works Of The Late Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl Of Chesterfield

Consisting Of Letters to his Friends, never before printed, And Various
Other Articles

**Chesterfield, Philip Dormer Stanhope of
Dublin, 1777**

VIII. Common Sense. Saturday, May 14, 1737. N° 16.

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VIII.

COMMON SENSE.

SATURDAY, May 14, 1737.

N^o 16.

I HAVE lately read with great pleasure father Du Halde's account of China, where I have found several rules of morality and good government, which the politest nations in Europe might adopt with honor, and practise with advantage. Many of them are conveyed, according to the oriental custom, in allegories and fables, so that they strike one more sensibly, and imprint themselves deeper in the memory, by their connexion with some familiar image. Among others, I observed this remarkable one, which I shall now give my readers.

Hoën Kong asked his minister Koan T'chong, "What was the most to be feared in a government?" Koan T'chong answered, "In my mind, sir, nothing is more to be dreaded than what they call *the rat in the statue.*" Hoën Kong not understanding the allegory, Koan T'chong explained it to him. "You know, sir, said he, that it is a common practice to erect statues to the genius of the place; these statues are of wood, hollow within, and painted without. If a rat gets into one of them, one does not know how to get him out: one does not care to make use of fire, for fear of burning the wood; one cannot dip it in water, for fear of washing off the colours; so that the regard one has for the statue, saves the rat that has got into it. Such, sir, are in every government those, *who, without virtue or merit, have gained the favour of their prince: they ruin every thing; one sees it, one laments it, but does not know how to remedy it.*"

I approve of the moral of the story, and am very much of Koan T'chong's mind, that nothing is to be dreaded more in a government, than this rat in the statue; but how he came to be of that mind himself, I cannot easily comprehend, for our author says he was a minister, and consequently

consequently of the rat kind. But as he does not indeed say, that he was the first, or sole minister, I am inclined to think that he was only one of those, who have the name and salary of ministers, without any of the power, and who are often glad to give a slap by the bye, to the first minister, though they have not courage enough openly to attack him.

After this short remark, I return to the allegory itself, which I cannot say is so apt as I expected, from a people so much versed in that manner of instruction. The parallel drawn between the emperor, and a wooden statue is so disrespectful and uncourtly, that I could have wished our author had informed us, how his Chinese majesty had relished the similitude, that is, in case he took all the force of it; for in reality, it was making no difference between an anointed head and a wooden one. A rat may very well eat his way into a statue unseen, unfelt, and unmelt: but can a minister, especially such a one as is here described, without virtue or merit, nibble himself into a prince's favour, and the prince not smell a rat? It is impossible; and the bare supposition of it was highly injurious to his royal wisdom and penetration. I will admit, in favour of Koan Tchong, that the eastern monarchs have not that degree of sagacity, which so eminently distinguishes and adorns the European ones, and I will allow, that they are more likely to be surprized and imposed upon by the artifices of a designing minister; their indolent and retired way of life, soaking in the arms of their imperial consorts, or wantoning in the embraces of their concubines, not giving them the same opportunity of seeing, or being informed. But still, when this general rule is universally seen and lamented, as Koan Tchong expresses it, the unanimous voice, the just complaints, the groans, and the desolation, of a ruined and oppressed people, must reach, must affect, and must rouse his majesty, if he be but ever so little above a statue. If not, if such an impossibility could be supposed, I must then confess, that the allegory of the painted wood is so far just, as that the king's head would properly be *but the sign of government*.

The conclusion Koan Tchong draws from this allegory is no less false and absurd; for, says he, when the rat is got into the statue, one does not know how to get
him

him out. One does not dare to make use of fire, for fear of burning the wood, one cannot dip it in water for fear of washing off the colours: so that the regard one has for the statue, saves the rat that is got into it. This tender regard for the statue would, with all submission to Koan Tchong, in my opinion, much better have become an Hibernian courtier than a Chinese one; for it is saying in very good Irish, that the statue, from the regard one has for it, shall be entirely devoured, for fear of being a little damaged or defaced. Whereas I should rather think, that the best way of shewing that regard for the statue would be, by saying as much as ever one could of it from the further depredations of the rat; even though it were to cost a limb or two, as is frequently practised upon human bodies. But to do Koan Tchong justice, I do not impute his reasoning to want of parts; I rather think it was a piece of ministerial logic, which has been used in other countries besides China. Here the minister breaks out, and the minister too, who seems to have no opinion of the distinguishing faculty of his prince, when he tries such a piece of sophistry upon him, which, I dare say, he would not have ventured in any other company. For he so closely connects the rat and the statue, and consequently, the king and the minister, that, in effect, he makes them but one flesh, and one would think they grew together like the two Hungarian girls*; by this way of reasoning, whoever attacked this all-devouring rat, *alias* minister, was an enemy to the statue, *alias* king; and, *vice versa*, those that were friends to rat and minister, were friends to statue and king.

This indissoluble union, would, I own, be most excellent doctrine for a minister to inculcate, could he find either king or nation weak enough to believe it: but I can never imagine that any thing so absurd could be received by the Chinese, who are a wise and sensible people: at least, it could not extend itself beyond the walls of the palace.

Let us now consider the allegory literally. These sacred, painted, tawdry images, are erected to the genii of the place; they are the productions of superstition,
and,

* Two Hungarian girls, that were shewn some years ago as a fine sight, and were fastened together by the rump.

and, probably, the creatures of the bonzes, who dub them sacred, and exhibit them as representations, wooden ones, alas! of the divinity. Sacrilegious rats eat their way into them, and endanger their wooden existence. What is to be done? Why truly they are to devour with impunity, for fear the statue should receive some small damage in the rescue; as if there were not a thousand ways of coming at the rat, with little or no danger to the statue. For instance, shaking it soundly might probably make the dwelling of the rat so uneasy, that he might be willing to quit it, for fear of something worse afterwards.

There is another obvious expedient that occurs, which is that of sending a cat up after him: but to this, I own, I have some objection myself, because, though the cat would kill the rat, he would possibly remain in his place, and be as unwilling to quit it. But is it possible that the useful art of rat-catching should be unknown to so ingenious a people as the Chinese? If it is, I would advise our East-India company to send them a rat-catcher or two next voyage, for whom they might expect as considerable returns, and advantages, as Whittington is reported to have made by his cat. Though, I am very sorry to say it, the noble art and mystery of rat-catching has greatly declined even here of late; and I should be at a loss how to find an honest and skilful artist to recommend to them.

But can one suppose, that the religion and piety of the bonzes would suffer them to remain indifferent spectators of such sacrilegious outrages; and that they, who can dislodge a devil, cannot get out a rat? Unless one has little charity enough to believe, that the bonzes, by a sort of communication, are not unwilling to let the rats take sanctuary in their statues, to be rid of them themselves, and so, by an interested and impious connivance, give up their gods to save their bacon.

To come now to the allegorical sense, which Koan Tchong had such a mind to establish. A minister without virtue or merit gains the favour of his prince: he ruins every thing; one sees it, one laments it, but one does not know how to remedy it. To me the remedy seems very easy and obvious; take the minister away from him, and prevent the ruin that threatened both him
and

and his country. I do not doubt, indeed, but the minister would, during the operation, cry out, like Koan Tchong; you attack the king, you deface the king, you wound the king through my sides, and would plead the king, as women do their bellies to respite execution: but, surely, upon examination, a degree of sagacity, much inferior to that of matrons, would be sufficient to bring him in not quick with king, but a distinct and separate body, easily removed, without the least danger to the sovereign.

Having fully discussed this allegory, I shall conclude with adopting one part of it, which is, that nothing is so much to be dreaded in a government, as a minister without virtue or merit, who gains the favour of his prince; but with entirely rejecting the latter part, that one fees and laments it, but, out of regard to the prince, one does not know how to remedy it: since that very regard for the prince should excite one to endeavour it, and common sense points out the means of doing it, if there be but common honesty enough to put them in practice.

IX *.

COMMON SENSE.

SATURDAY, June 4, 1737.

N^o 19.

To the Author of COMMON SENSE.

—*Vocem Comœdia tollit.*

HOR.

Comedy lifts her voice.

S I R,

AS the cause of common sense and the stage are jointly concerned, some observations on the bill depending at present for the regulation of the latter cannot be thought improper for your paper; especially since I believe

* The act for licensing the theatres was attacked with great strength of reasoning by our nobleman in his famous speech on that subject, and with great humour and delicacy in this essay. But notwithstanding his efforts, the bill was carried through both houses with an amazing rapidity, and received the royal assent the 21st of June 1737.