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In Five Volumes

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The WORLD.

By ADAM FITZ-ADAM.

NUMB. X. *Thursday, March 8, 1753.*

THE great men, who introduced the reformation into these kingdoms, were so sensible of the necessity of maintaining devotion in the minds of the vulgar by some external objects, by somewhat of ceremony and form, that they refrained from entirely ripping off all ornament from the drapery of religion. When they were purging the calendar of legions of visionary saints, they took due care to defend the niches of real martyrs from profanation. They preserved the holy festivals, which had been consecrated for many ages to the great luminaries of the church, and at once paid observance to the memory of the good, and fell in with the popular humour, which loves to rejoice and mourn at the discretion of the almanack.

The Fanatics in the reign of Charles the first loudly condemned the retention of this practice, and were such successful preachers, as to procure obedience to the doctrines they taught; that is, they infused greater bigotry into their congregations against rules, than the warmest enthusiasts of former times had been able to propagate for the observation of times and seasons. But as most contradictions run into extremes, it must be allowed that the Presbyterians soon grew as superstitious as the most high-flown zealots of the Established Church. King James the first had endeavoured to turn Sunday into a weekly wake by the book of Sports: the Presbyterians used it often for a fast-day*. In the court of king Charles, Christmas was a season of

* One of Dr. Calamy's fast-sermons was preached on Christmas-day, 1644, before the house of lords.

maſques

masques and revels: under the Covenant it was still a masquerading time; for devotion may be as much disguised by hypocritic sorrow and sackcloth, as by painted vizors and harlequin jackets.

In so enlightened an age as the present, I shall perhaps be ridiculed if I hint, as my opinion, that the observation of certain festivals is something more than a mere political institution. I cannot however help thinking that even nature itself concurs to confirm my sentiment. Philosophers and free-thinkers tell us that a general system was laid down at first, and that no deviations have been made to accommodate it to any subsequent events, or to favour and authorize any human institutions. When the reformation of the calendar was in agitation, to the great disgust of many worthy persons who urged how great the harmony was in the old establishment between the holidays and their attributes (if I may call them so), and what a confusion would follow if Michaelmas-day, for instance, was not to be celebrated when stubble geese are in their highest perfection; it was replied, that such a propriety was merely imaginary, and would be lost of itself, even without any alteration of the calendar by authority: for if the errors in it were suffered to go on, they would in a certain number of years produce such a variation, that we should be mourning for good king Charles on a false thirtieth of January, at a time of year when our ancestors used to be tumbling over head and heels in Greenwich-park in honour of Whitsuntide; and at length be choosing king and queen for twelfth-night, when we ought to be admiring the London Prentice at Bartholomew-fair.

Cogent as these reasons may seem, yet I think I can confute them from the testimony of a standing miracle, which, not having submitted to the fallible authority of an act of parliament, may well be said to put a supernatural negative on the wisdom of this world. My readers no doubt are already aware that I have in my eye the wonderful thorn of Glastonbury*, which, though hitherto regarded as a trunk of popish imposture, has notably exerted itself as the most protestant plant in the universe. It is well known that the correction of the calendar was enacted by pope Gregory the thirteenth, and that the reformed churches have with a proper spirit of opposition adhered to the

* A very sensible sermon was published on the old Christmas. Several advertisements were this occasion, without a name; it having been printed pro & con. pretended that the Glastonbury thorn blew on

old calculation of the emperor Julius Cæsar, who was by no means a papist. * Near two years ago the popish calendar was brought in; (I hope by persons well-affected!) certain it is that the Glastonbury thorn has preserved its † *inflexibility*, and observed its old anniversary. Many thousand spectators visited it on the parliamentary Christmas-day—Not a bud was to be seen!—On the true Nativity it was covered with blossoms. One must be an infidel indeed to spurn at such authority. Had I been consulted (and mathematical studies have not been the most inconsiderable of my speculations), instead of turning the calendar topsy-turvy by fantastic calculations, I should have proposed to regulate the year by the infallible Somersétshire thorn, and to have reckoned the months from Christmas-day, which should always have been kept as the Glastonbury thorn should blow.

Many inconveniencies, to be sure, would follow from this system; but as holy things ought to be the first consideration of a religious nation, the inconveniencies should be overlooked. The thorn can never blow but on the true Christmas-day: and consequently the apprehension of the year's becoming inverted by sticking to the Julian account can never hold. If the course of the sun varies, astronomers may find out some way to adjust that: but it is preposterous, not to say presumptuous, to be celebrating Christmas-day, when the Glastonbury thorn, which certainly must know times and seasons better than an almanack-maker, declares it to be heresy.

Nor is Christmas-day the only jubilee which will be morally disturbed by this innovation. There is another anniversary of no less celebrity among Englishmen, equally marked by a marvellous concomitance of circumstances, and which I venture to prognosticate will not attend the erroneous calculation of the present system. The day I mean is the first of April. The oldest tradition affirms, that such an infatuation attends the first day of that month, as no foresight can escape, no vigilance can defeat. Deceit is successful on that day out of the mouths of babes and sucklings. Grave citizens have been bit upon it; usurers have lent their money on bad security; experienced matrons have married very disappointing young fellows; mathematicians have missed the longitude; alchemists the philosopher's stone; and politicians preferment, on that day.

* This bill was brought in by lord Chesterfield and lord Macclesfield, the latter of whom published his speech on that occasion.

† This alludes to sir George Vandeput, can-

didate for Westminster, who advertised this year, That he would persist *inflexibly* in the part he had taken, but in two days gave up the election.

What confusion will not follow, if the great body of the nation are disappointed of their peculiar holiday ! The country was formerly disturbed with very fatal quarrels about the celebration of Easter : and no wise man will tell me, that it is not as reasonable to fall out for the observance of April-fool-day. Can any benefits arising from a regulated calendar make amends for an occasion of new sects ? How many warm men may repent an attempt to play them off on a false first of April, who would have submitted to the custom of being made fools on the old computation ! If our clergy come to be divided about folly's anniversary, we may well expect all the mischiefs attendant on religious wars ; and we shall have reason to wish that the Glastonbury thorn would declare as remarkably in favour of the true April-fool-day, as it has in behalf of the genuine Christmas.

Prudentius* was so great a zealot for the observation of certain festivals, as to believe that the very damned have a holiday, or remission from their torments, on the anniversary of the Resurrection. I will not say that we ought to follow *their* reckoning, nor shall I defend the orthodoxy of the tenet. I only mention it to show how many interests may be affected by this regulation, and how impossible it is to make adequate provisions against all the unforeseen mischiefs that may ensue from disturbing the established computation.

There are many other inconveniencies, which I might lament very emphatically, but none of weight enough to be compared with those I have mentioned. I shall only hint at a whole system overturned by this revolution in the calendar, and no provision, that I have heard of, made by the legislature to remedy it. Yet in a nation which bestows such ample rewards on new-year and birth-day odes, it is astonishing that the late act of parliament should have overlooked that useful branch of our poetry, which consists in couplets, saws, and proverbs, peculiar to certain days and seasons. Why was not a new set of distichs provided by the late reformers ? or at least a clause inserted in the act, enjoining the poet-laureat, or some benefited genius, to prepare and new-cast the established rhymes for public use ? Were our astronomers so ignorant as to think that the old proverbs would serve for their new-fangled calendar ? Could they imagine that † saint Swithin would ac-

* A christian poet.

† saint Swithin's-day O. S. it will rain for forty

subsequent days.

commodate

commodate his rainy planet to the convenience of their calculations? Who that hears the following verses, but must grieve for the shepherd and husbandman, who may have all their prognostics confounded, and be at a loss to know beforehand the fate of their markets? Ancient sages sung,

“ If faint Paul be fair and clear,
 “ Then will betide a happy year;
 “ But if it either snow or rain,
 “ Then will be dear all kinds of grain:
 “ And if the wind doth blow aloft,
 “ Then wars will vex the realm full oft.”

I have declared against meddling with politics, and therefore shall say nothing of the important hints contained in the last lines: yet if * certain ill-boding appearances abroad should have an ugly end, I cannot help saying that I shall ascribe their evil tendency to our having been lulled asleep by resting our faith on the calm weather on the pretended conversion of saint Paul; whereas it was very blustering on that festival, according to the good old account, as I honestly, though vainly, endeavoured to convince a great minister of state, whom I do not think proper to mention.

But to return to April-fool-day: I must entreat my readers and admirers to be very particular in their observations on that holiday, both according to the new and old reckoning. And I beg that they will transmit to me, or my secretary Mr. Doddsley, a faithful and attested account of the hap that betides them or their acquaintance on each of those days; how often and in what manner they make or are made fools; how they miscarry in attempts to surprize, or baffle any snares laid for them. I do not doubt but it will be found that the balance of folly lies greatly on the side of the old first of April; nay, I much question whether infatuation will have any force on what I call the false April-fool-day. I should take it very kind, if any of my friends who may happen to be sharpeners, would try their success on the fictitious festival; and if they make fewer dupes than ordinary, I flatter myself that they will unite their endeavours with mine in decrying and exploding a reformation, which only tends to discountenance good old practices and venerable superstitions.

* Alludes to the stoppage of the payment on the Silesian loan, by the king of Prussia.