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XV.18 On the emancipated and the eunuchs

- The Spirit of Law - Book XV. How the laws of civil slavery relate to the nature of the climate -

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Thus, under a government by many, it is often useful for the station of the emancipated to be somewhat lower than that of the freeborn, and for the laws to strive to counter their disaffection for their station. But under the government of one man alone, when luxury and arbitrary power reign, there is nothing to be done in this respect : the emancipated almost always find themselves above free men. They dominate at the prince's court and in the palaces of the great ; and since they have studied their master's weaknesses and not his virtues, they have him reign not by his virtues but by his weaknesses. Such were the emancipated in Rome in the time of the emperors.

When the principal slaves are eunuchs, whatever privilege they be granted, they can hardly be regarded as emancipated. For since they cannot have families, they are by their nature attached to a family, and it is only by a sort of fiction that they can be considered as citizens.

Nevertheless, there are countries where they are given all the magistracies : "In Tonkin," [1] says Dampierre, "all the civil and military mandarins are eunuchs." [2] They have no families, and while they are naturally greedy, the master or prince ultimately profits from their very greed.

The same Dampierre tells us that in that country the eunuchs cannot do without women, and that they marry. [3] The law that allows them to marry can only be based, on the one hand, on the consideration in which men like them are held, and on the other, on the contempt in which women are held.

Thus the magistracies are entrusted to such persons because they have no family, and on the other hand they are allowed to marry because they hold the magistracies.

It is then that the remaining senses try obstinately to compensate for those that have been lost, and that the enterprises of despair are a sort of sensual pleasure. Thus, in Milton, that spirit who has nothing left but desires, acutely aware of his degradation, tries to make use of his very impotence.

We find in the history of China a large number of laws to deny all civil and military functions to eunuchs ; but they keep coming back. It seems that eunuchs in the Orient are a necessary evil.

[1] It used to be that way in China. The two Mohammedan Arabs who travelled there in the ninth century say "eunuch" when they mean the governor of a city.

[2] [Dampier,] Vol. III, p. 91. [Although the quotation marks are in the original, this does not appear to be a direct quotation.]

[3] Vol. III, p. 94.