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XX.2 On the spirit of commerce

- The Spirit of Law - Book XX. On laws in their relationship with commerce, considered in its nature and its distinctions -

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XX.2 On the spirit of commerce

The natural effect of commerce is to dispose us to peace. Two nations that trade together become dependant on each other ; if one has an interest in buying, the other has an interest in selling, and all unions are based on reciprocal needs.

But if the spirit of commerce unites nations, it does not at the same time unite individuals. We see that in countries [1] that pride themselves solely on the spirit of commerce : they traffic in all sorts of human actions and all moral virtues ; for them the smallest things, those which humanity requires, are done or given for money.

The spirit of commerce produces in men a certain sentiment of exact justice, opposed on the one hand to banditry, and on the other to those moral virtues because of which we do not always examine our interests closely, and can neglect them for those of others.

The total privation of commerce on the contrary produces banditry, which Aristotle numbers among the means of acquisition. Its spirit is not opposed to certain moral virtues : for example, hospitality, very rare in trading countries, is right at home among peoples of bandits.

Among the Germans, says Tacitus, it is a sacrilege to refuse your home to any man at all, known or unknown. He who has practiced hospitality [2] toward a stranger is going to point him to another house where it is still practiced, and he is welcomed there with the same humanity. But once the Germans had founded kingdoms, hospitality became a burden to them. This appears from two laws in the code of the Burgundians, one of which inflicts a penalty on any barbarian who would point out a Roman's house to a stranger, and the other prescribes that he who receives a stranger shall be compensated by the inhabitants, each one for his proper share. [3]

[1] Holland.

[2] [*Qui modo hospes fuerat monstrator hospitii* (*De moribus Germanorum* [ch. xxi]). See also Cæsar, *Gallic Wars*, book VI.

[3] Title 38.