

PREFACE.

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of religion, wheresoever he should command. The fundamental maxim of the society was, that instead of being buried in monkish sloth and solitude, they should devote themselves to more active beneficence. In return for absolution from all pious austerities and mortifications, they declared themselves the champions of truth, and crusaders against its enemies. To promote the service of religion in all parts of the globe, the instruction of youth and the ignorant, to observe the transactions of the world, to study the characters and dispositions of persons in authority, to inform themselves of the policy of governments and genius of nations, were the pursuits to which they dedicated their lives; pursuits, in themselves, most laudable; however they might be perverted to improper purposes. In order to facilitate and support their missions, the Jesuits were permitted to trade with the countries they visited; and formerly were engaged in extensive and lucrative commerce, both in the East and West Indies. About the beginning of the 17th century, they made a settlement on the river Plate, in the province of Paraguay, in South America, where their empire was distinguished by wisdom and tranquillity.

For many years past, this once flourishing and influential association, has been degraded, dispersed and diminishing. Their name has become a designation for intrigue and duplicity; and the few that remain, have drained to the dregs the chalice of humiliation. If it has been contemplated to revive the order and restore its privileges, it is probable, that for the vow of obedience to the pope, now no longer necessary, another would be substituted, binding them to the destinies of the extraordinary personage to whom their elevation would be owing; who is incessantly rearing religious, as well as political ramparts round his throne; and who, from such partisans, might derive, for himself and his dynasty, the most essential services.

But this is all surmise. And of its probability, as well as of the object of the writer of these letters, whether political, commercial, or ecclesiastical; and whether in truth the whole be not a fabrication, their readers, we repeat, must determine for themselves.