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CHAPTER X.

THE PRACTICE OF THE GOVERNMENT.

THE practice of the government, under the constitution, has not altered the legal meaning of the instrument. It means now what it did before it was ratified, when it was first offered to the people for their adoption or rejection. One of the advantages of a written constitution is, that it enables the people to see what its character is before they adopt it; and another is, that it enables them to see

after they have adopted it, whether the government adheres to it, or departs from it. Both these advantages, each of which is indispensable to liberty, would be entirely forfeited, if the legal meaning of a written constitution were one thing when the instrument was offered to the people for their adoption, and could then be made another thing by the government after the people had adopted it.

It is of no consequence, therefore, what meaning the government *have* placed upon the instrument; but only what meaning they were *bound to place upon it* from the beginning.

The only question, then, to be decided, is, what was the meaning of the constitution, *as a legal instrument*, when it was first drawn up, and presented to the people, and before it was adopted by them?

To this question there certainly can be but one answer. There is not room for a doubt or an argument, on that point, in favor of slavery. The instrument itself is palpably a free one throughout, in its language, its principles, and all its provisions. As a legal instrument, there is no trace of slavery in it. It not only does not sanction slavery, but it does not even recognize its existence. More than this, it is palpably and wholly incompatible with slavery. It is also the supreme law of the land, in contempt of any State constitution or law that should attempt to establish slavery.

Such was the character of the constitution when it was offered to the people, and before it was adopted. And if such was its character then, such is its character still. It cannot have been changed by all the errors and perversions, intentional or unintentional, of which the government may have since been guilty.