

THE TRIAL OF THE SEVEN BISHOPS.*

One of those tragic spectacles of justice violated, of religion menaced, of innocence oppressed, of unarmed dignity outraged, with all the conspicuous solemnities of abused law, in the persons of men of exalted rank and venerated functions, who encounter wrongs and indignities with mild intrepidity.—*Sir James Mackintosh.*

Of all the studies calculated to engage the attention, to enlarge the mind, and to strengthen and purify the heart, there is none more delightful or instructive, than the biography of the worthies of the Anglican Church. There is no species of the highest human excellence, of which these holy men have not left us an exemplar; there is no field of learning or science which they have not extended and adorned; there is no rampart of the Christian Faith which they have not either reared or fortified by their matchless and accumulated erudition; and so great and so various are the treasures of theological literature which they have bequeathed to the world, and more especially to their fellow-countrymen,—for they spoke in the common tongue,—that were the writings of Dissent entirely consumed by some modern Omar, and the works of the Divines of our English Establishment, alone remained extant, the loss would be but little felt, and but a mere stone would have been dislodged from the unshaken fortress of Christianity. Reverse the case, however,—suppose the Literature of Dissent preserved, and that of the Church destroyed,—where would be the glory of our English Theology?—where those noble and impregnable defences, constructed by the hand of a Pearson, a Bull, a Waterland, a Butler, and a Magee, against which the Infidel and Socinian level their objections and cavils, only to be shivered into a thousand fragments?

Take our divines from the cloistered study, and the halls of learning, and observe how they demean themselves in times that prove the temper of a man, and refine, or consume him, in the fires of persecution. Behold the fabric of our Reformed Church slowly rising under the patient care of Cranmer, and subsequently watered by his blood. How beautifully, as we sit abstracted from the external world, with our eyes open but not employed, and with our mental vision thereby rendered the more intense, do a thousand mitred and crosiered forms, glide across our path, and suffuse the surrounding imaginary scene with a mellow and celestial light! Meekly and thoughtfully, the kindred spirits of Usher, Leighton, and Sancroft seem to hold solemn converse. Juxon irradiates his martyred monarch's scaffold with the mild lustre of faith and hope. Jeremy Taylor, the earliest champion of toleration, indulges in his divine contemplations, and hark not his harp upon the willows, though he weeps, and remembers Zion. The much calumniated, the munificent, the sincere, the good Laud lays his grey hairs upon the block, committing his soul to God, and his fame to the charitable judgment of posterity. Hall, the asserter of the Divine Right of Episcopacy, is buffeted by indignities, which his learning, moderation, and piety provoked. Kenn and Lake withstand the tyrant James,—and oppose their crozier and “unsullied lawn” to the axe and blood-dyed garments of Jefferies. Wilson traverses the Isle of Man, and the deserted Manxmen are only restrained by the Bishop himself from bursting the prison doors, within which a godless and arbitrary Governor had dared to thirst him. Barrington, Burgess, and Van Mildert appear before us laying the foundations of Institutions, dedicated to the service of Christ, and expending sums, such as monarchs might give, noiselessly and secretly in the alleviation of human misery. But where would be the limit, if we were to recount each name that has adorned the annals of our English Hierarchy? Here and there a solitary exception,—a worldly, an ambitious, or an unlearned, prelate is thrust unworthily by court-favour, or some sinister means, into the apostolic seat; worse even than this, there have been bishops, but few, very few, indeed, fit compeers for Judas Iscariot, but in no greater proportion to the rest of their brethren, than he to the twelve disciples—yet making all these deductions, and recollecting that the chief pastors of our Church, are after all, but frail men like ourselves, we may safely assert that the

Bishops of the Church of England, as a body, by their courage at the stake, their learning in the cloister, their eloquence in the pulpit, their labours in their dioceses, and their presence in the senate, have faithfully discharged the duties of their awful calling, and drawn down the blessings of Heaven upon their country.

It would be difficult to say which is the brightest period of our Episcopal annals,—whether the reign of Mary, when five of the Bishops joined the “noble army of martyrs” in Heaven; whether the era of the Grand Rebellion, when our venerable and loyal prelates, with their inferior clergy, were either incarcerated, compelled to fly or abscond, and in many instances barressed unto death; or whether the crisis of the Revolution, when the holy fathers of our Church resisted the King in his might, and yet rather than violate their conscience, involved themselves in his downfall to which their firmness had mainly contributed. The details of the two former periods are perused with a more painful and shuddering interest, and more strongly excite our horror, indignation and compassion; but the latter is a spot in English history, on which we can gaze with not less of interest,—albeit of a nature different and not so harrowing,—while at the same time we can survey it with a degree of rejoicing and patriotic exultation, to which we could not give way, when recalling the Popish fires of Oxford, or the Puritan atrocities of the tyrannical Long Parliament.

James II., in his insatiable attempt to subvert the civil and religious liberties of England, was fully aware that the principal barrier to his unhallowed project was the Church of England. Having therefore assumed the guise of toleration, as a mask to his designs, and as a snare to entrap the Dissenters into his support, he issued, on the 27th April, 1689, the celebrated Declaration for Liberty of Conscience, in which he claimed the illegal power of dispensing with the penal laws against Dissenters and Roman Catholics, and which had for its real object the destruction of the Protestant faith, and the restoration of Popery to its long-lost ascendancy and power. A subsequent order from the King was directed to the Bishops, commanding them to cause his Declaration to be read at the usual time of divine service, by the clergy in their respective dioceses. The Bishops, as the sentinels of national religion, took alarm at this arbitrary violation of the laws, and after due consultation determined not to comply with the royal mandate, but presented a respectful petition to James, remonstrating against the illegality of the power which he had assumed. The day appointed for the reading of the Declaration soon drew nigh, and so nobly and faithfully were the Bishops sustained by the great body of the clergy, that “not more than two hundred in all,” states Sir James Mackintosh, “are said to have complied out of a body of ten thousand.” Irritated at this disobedience, the King, on the 8th June, ordered the Seven Prelates who had signed the Petition to be committed to the Tower, on the plea of having published a seditious libel against the Sovereign and his government.

The names of these venerable champions of our faith, are William Sancroft, Archbishop of Canterbury; William Lloyd, bishop of St. Asaph; Francis Turner, of Ely; John Lake, of Chichester; Thomas Kenn, of Bath and Wells; Thomas White of Peterborough; and Sir Jonathan Trelawney of Bristol.—Had they but lifted up a finger, the people would have risen in a mass to their rescue. But in meekness, and lowliness, without any attempt to excite the popular sympathy, nay with the strongest desire and effort to suppress it, they proceeded to the barges that were to convey them to the Tower. The populace expressed their feelings in tears and prayers.—Thousands begged the blessing of the Bishops, even running into the water to implore it. Multitudes, kneeling and supplicating Heaven for their deliverance, lined the banks of the Thames as they passed. On landing at the Tower, several of the guards, and even some of the officers, knelt down to receive their blessings; and it was observed at the time, and deemed a mark of special Providential interference, that on the evening of the Bishops' commitment, when they attended divine service in the chapel of the Tower, the second lesson was the sixth chapter of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, wherein they

were exhorted, “to approve themselves ministers of God, with patience, in afflictions, in imprisonments.”

The same manifestation of popular feeling continued unabated throughout the following days. The nobility, of both sexes, hastened to proffer their solicitude and assistance to the venerable prisoners, and to beg their blessing; the soldiers on guard, despite of the reprimand of their commanding officer, drank their healths; and dense masses of true-born Englishmen thronged around the Tower, as if ready, should occasion arise, to do battle for the passive guardians of the common liberties. Even the dissenting ministers, though so long silent in behalf of the Protestant cause, now came forward in many instances, with a noble forgetfulness of all past dissensions, and sent a deputation to visit and encourage the Prelates, whom they had before opposed.

On the 15th June, the Bishops were brought before the Court of King's Bench, by a writ of Habeas Corpus; and after having pleaded “Not Guilty,” to the charge alleged against them, were liberated on their own undertaking to appear on the trial, which was appointed to take place on the 29th of June.—On this occasion, both when repairing to, and when leaving the court, they were greeted with undiminished symptoms of the general affection, and enthusiasm in their favour. Weeping crowds kneeling in a lane to receive their apostolic benediction—twenty-nine peers offering to be their sureties, and, together with numerous gentlemen, attending them in Court, shouts and huzzas unrestrained even in the presence of the judge—the bishop of St. Asaph, detained in Palace Yard by a multitude, who kissed his hand and garments,—the Archbishop received with military honours, and on bended knees by the soldiers posted at Lambeth to guard him—the bells of Westminster Abbey, ringing out a jubilant peal,—and bonfires, and festivities in the streets at night, and oranges offered to Roman Catholics,—all these were prophetic incidents which were doubtless conveyed to the Bigot King. How great therefore, must have been the infatuation, that led him to disregard the MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN, which the hand of nature was writing on his palace-walls!

The day of the ever memorable twenty-ninth June, beheld the Bishops entering the Court, supported and attended as before. The four Judges were on the Bench; the Attorney and Solicitor General, and two other eminent lawyers appeared for the Crown; while among the counsel retained for the prisoners, were the names, so dear to every Protestant, of Finch, an ancestor of the present Earl Winchelsea, and of Somers, afterwards, the great Lord Chancellor and Statesman. The trial which proceeded in the usual form, and lasted during the whole day, was frequently interrupted, by unusual and irrepressible outbreaks of the feeling of the audience.

On every turn of the case, unfavourable to the prosecution, “a triumphant laugh, or a shout of joy, which the Chief Justice soon gave over attempt to check,” rang ominously through the Court. Lord Sunderland, the king's prime minister who had already become a secret Romanist, appeared as a witness; and after having gone through the ordeal of being hooted, and hissed, and denounced as a “pish dog” by the clamorous multitude around the doors, came into the Court colourless, trembling, downcast, bowed beneath a load of public obloquy and self-reproach. Williams, one of the crown lawyers, on making some indiscreet allusion, was received with a general hiss.

At length the counsel on either side had done their part, and the Chief Justice proceeded to sum up the evidence to the Jury. Two of the Bench, Winchelsea (the Chief Justice) and Allynbone, considered that the petition amounted to a libel; Holloway and Prynne pronounced it to be no libel. The Jury retired in the evening, and could not concur in a verdict, till six o'clock on the following morning. At the trial the prelates were brought into Court, and the verdict was delivered in their verdict—GUILTY.

The shouts that arose within the court at the nunciation of this glorious result, were instantly caught up by the assembled thousands from without. With the rapidity of the fiery-cross,—the war of the Highlands,—stunning acclamations of triumph rushed from one end of the metropolis to the other.

* From the Church.