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THE PROTESTANT RIOTS OF 1780.

(From the Dublin Review, April, 1873.)

A complete narrative of the origin and the achievements of that baleful conspiracy which, towards the close of the eighteenth century, sought a renewal of the horrors of the fell penal code against the Catholics of Great Britain has, strange to say, never been presented to the student of English history. A plot, warily concocted, carried out with the diabolical capacity and energy, which had for its object the oppression of a large but helpless and most innocent portion of the community, and which almost resulted in civil war, seems to deserve more conspicuous, detailed, and authentic notice than can be possibly afforded by a few violent partisan pamphlets, or by the abridged and sensational description of writers of romance. We have therefore ventured to undertake a faithful account of a neglected and almost forgotten portion of the religious history of this country, but which yet is full of solemn instruction both for Catholics and Protestant readers.

The political condition of the Catholics of England and Scotland, even so late as the end of the eighteenth century, was such as it is difficult for us at the present day to realize. Nearly the whole of the sanguinary laws of the Tudor and the Stuart were still in full force against them. No Catholic could be attorney, or justice, or post-master, nor sit in Parliament, nor vote at elections, nor keep fire-arms, nor defend a suit at law, nor be guardian, or executor, nor practise law or physic. Any person apprehending a Popish Bishop, Priest, or Jesuit, and prosecuting to conviction, was entitled to £100 reward, and the convict was imprisoned for life. Catholics were disabled from purchasing, or inheriting, or taking any lands by descent, devise, or limitation, but these were to be given to the next of kin (provided he were a Protestant). The punishment for saying Mass was perpetual imprisonment, and the same was the penalty for teaching in a private family. To convert a Protestant to the Catholic faith was the crime of high treason.

Such, in brief, was the law in England down to the year 1778, a condition of things worthy a heathen emperor or an oriental despot. And there was this additional ignominy in connection with the statute from which the Catholics suffered chiefly at the period to which we refer, that it owed its existence not to a mistaken religious zeal, but merely to a vile, political manoeuvre. The Act of the 11th and 12th of King William originated in party faction. It was brought into the House of Commons by the Opposition, without any hope, or indeed any desire, that it should become law; but in order that the Court party, by rejecting it, as it was confidently supposed they would, might incur with the nation the odium of favoring the Papists! The Court party saw through the snare, and avoided it by passing the severe measures proposed. Thus from 1699 until 1778 Catholics were the victims of enactments of the harshest description that had become law simply to serve the purposes of party intrigue.

It must not, however, be imagined that the people of England were nearly as bad as their legislators would have made them. The instances are many in which the well-protected Protestant shielded from the storm his perfectly unprotected Catholic fellow-creature. It

was made a point of honor in several counties not to give the least encouragement to either priest-hunter or informer. It also not infrequently happened that men were to be met with of sufficient moral firmness to refuse to add to their own estates, by a criminal acceptance of property forfeited for conscience sake, an act which they rightly enough judged would condemn them to undying infamy. For the honor of human nature we rejoice to record this; at the same time it will be easily conceived that these were the exceptions. The reward that was held out to cupidity was so great, and impunity in the injustice so certain, that it was not to be expected of the ordinary run of mankind that they would abstain from such a lucrative spoliation of the defenceless, as offered itself before their very eyes in the persons of the Roman Catholics.

But a change was near at hand. Urged on by a strong sense of the indignities and wrongs of which they had been for so long a time the victims, and, moreover, encouraged by a promise of hearty support from all those who in enlightenment and culture were greatly in advance of their age, the Catholics of England resolved at length to make an effort to obtain from the Government some recognition of their right to be protected by the legislation of their native land. With this object, on the 1st of May, 1778, the Catholic peers and commons of Great Britain presented an address to his Majesty, through Earl Surrey and the Lords Linton and Petre, stating their patience and peaceableness during years of past rigor, and expressing a hope that his Majesty would see no obstacle between his loyal Catholic people and their admittance to the rights common to all British subjects. This address was intended to pave the way for a motion which it had already been resolved to put before the House of Commons, a fortnight later, for leave to bring in a Bill for the relief of the Catholics of England from their present grievances and shameful disabilities. As it was known would be the case before they ventured to present it, the address met with a gracious reception, and, thus encouraged, Sir George Saville, on the 14th of May, moved for permission to bring in a Bill for "the repeal of certain penalties and disabilities provided in an Act of 10th and 11th of William III., entitled 'An Act to prevent the further growth of Popery.'"

Saville, upon whom Burke passed this eulogium, that "he was an instance of true genius with a fortune, which though unnumbered by luxury or excess, was sinking under the benevolence of its dispenser," was in every respect the guardian spirit of the persecuted Catholics of those dark days. In a splendid torrent of indignant oratory, he denounced the long-standing wicked oppression:—

I plead the cause of an oppressed body of men, who are almost forgotten in the patience and silence with which for many years they have endured their grievances. The Bill, of which I ask the repeal, is a standing memorial of civil incour and discord. It holds out a pecuniary reward to stimulate avarice to do what nature refuses, it renders the Catholic a foreigner in his native land, for he can acquire no estate, either by purchase, donation or industry.— The effect of this Act upon the clergy is to oblige them to conceal themselves either in private houses, or as the chaplains to foreign ministers; its effect upon the whole body of Catholics is to condemn them to beggary and ignorance. Protestantism has no right to exist if it uphold knowingly so infamous a law.

He was seconded by Dunning, who with a noble daring went into particulars that must have stung with reproach many a member of that House of Commons who was living sumptuously upon the spoils torn from the old Catholic families:—

This disgraceful law makes it felony in any foreigner to officiate in England as a priest, but high treason in a native. By it, Catholics being educated abroad forfeit their estates, which are bestowed upon the next Protestant relative. By it power is given to the son to take the estate from the real proprietor, even though he may be his own father. It prevents the Catholics from acquiring any legal property by purchase, which word is applied by the law to all property acquired by any means than that of descent. All of these disabilities, which are a disgrace to humanity, it is our object to repeal.— And although this law has been softened in practice, still are the Catholics constantly at the mercy of the lowest of mankind, for on the evidence of any of these wretches, the informers, whom the law encourages, our judges are bound to enforce all the shameful penalties of the Act. To continue these is therefore nothing less than to hold out a most powerful temptation for deeds, at the thought of which nature recoils with horror; for they are calculated to loosen the bonds of society, to dissolve all obligations, to poison domestic life, and to annihilate every principle of honor.

The motion was received with universal approbation; the Bill was accordingly brought in, and passed without a single negative; for, as Saville remarked, "Every member who had read over the Act of William III., saw at once that in repealing it, he was, after all, not so much doing a favour to Catholics as trying to remove a dark disgrace from Protestantism." And yet this relief Bill, though regarded by those in whose favor it was passed as a great boon, did no more than repeal part of 1st Act

of 11th and 12th of the reign of William III., namely, those clauses that offered a reward for the conviction of any bishop or priest accused of exercising his sacred functions, as also that enactment by which Catholics were disabled from purchasing or inheriting property. The faithful were still subject to penalties if they attempted to teach, or to be present at Mass; they were still prohibited from holding any public office; in fact, the greater part of the enactments of the penal code remained in full force against them. Yet the appeal of the Protestant Association stated it as a huge grievance that "the remaining laws against Popery were but as a body without the soul."

The Act (18 George III. c. 60) which thus gave tardy and partial relief to a most ill-treated and long-suffering body of men, and which received the support and approval of the honorable-minded of every religious persuasion, was, however, destined to produce results beyond all human calculation.

The General Assembly of the Protestants of Scotland happened to be sitting when the English Act was in agitation. Upon a notice being laid before the Assembly that a remonstrance against the Catholic Relief Bill should be forwarded to Parliament, it was, much to the honor of that body, rejected by a majority of one hundred. An Act so tolerant and just encouraged the Scotch Catholics to proceed with a measure which naturally they had already contemplated, namely, to prepare a petition to the legislature for an extension to them of the same relaxation of the penal code as had been granted to their brethren in England.— Accordingly, an address for this purpose was drawn up, and received the signatures, not only of the Catholics, but also of some of the most eminent amongst the Protestants of Edinburgh; first amongst whom appeared Robertson the historian. All seemed to promise fair; an early day was appointed for the presentation of the address; and the event was looked forward to with eager expectancy by the Catholics, who sought to be relieved from an odious and oppressive law, as well as by the real patriot, who wished to see a dark stain removed from the statute book of a Christian country. Both were doomed for a time to be grievously disappointed.

The report that the Scotch Catholics were secretly at work laboring to effect their release from the penal laws which had so long weighed upon them, had been spread amongst the Calvinists from the first, and had met with derisive incredulity. When, however, it became known for a certain fact that the petition was ready for presentation, that no less a person than the Lord Advocate himself had undertaken to present it, and that the Government was quite prepared to grant all its demands, the panic and dismay of the Scotch bigots rose to a critical pitch. Societies were at once formed for the "Defence of the Protestant Faith," committees were appointed to issue pamphlets to inflame the popular mind, flysheets were scattered about in thousands, describing the "idolatry of Popery," the "crimes of the Jesuits," the "slaughter of kings and Protestant nations as taught by the Popes." It may be as well to put on record that the most seditious and the most criminal of all these foul productions was the work of a nonconformist clergyman hired for this especial task by the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge. The "Protestant Safety Committee," as it was called, had appointed it, as its chief duty, to foment the western shires of the kingdom, to keep the public in a state of constant agitation by violent anti-Catholic articles in the newspapers, by alarming placards on the street walls, by inflammatory "no Popery" harangues at the corners of the thoroughfares.

The effect was soon too evident. It began to show itself first in angry, menacing declarations against the Catholics, made in the provincial synods, at which also resolutions were passed to oppose every attempted measure of relief. The zealots called upon the people from the pulpits to undertake for themselves the protection of the national church, and to avoid as plague-stricken all those false shepherds who had been bribed to betray the chosen flock of God. There was no misunderstanding the intention of all this, and they whom it most concerned were naturally the first to perceive, and to endeavor to defeat it. So a message was sent to Lord North through some of the northern members, stating that the Catholics of Scotland, unwilling to be the cause of any civil disorder, would refrain from making the proposed application to the legislature for a participation in the legal benefits that had been conferred upon their coreligionists in England. A circular to this effect was widely spread throughout Edinburgh, Glasgow, and other centres of the Protestant agitation, in the hope that it would assuage the fanatical fury of the bigots.

But it was too late. The prospect of a season of violence and riot, greed for plunder,

added to the excitement of irreligious hate, had roused the worst blood of the fiercest mob in Europe. And so well known was the magistracy of Edinburgh at that time, and so little apprehensive were the conspirators of any attempt at effective opposition to their designs, that public notice was given that it was the intention of the Protestants of Edinburgh to assemble for "the defence of their king, their country, and their creed, now threatened by the emissaries of the Pope." They specified the time of their rising, their place of meeting, and the object they had in view, and concluded by summoning all "good men and true" to come forth to their aid. On Sunday, Jan. 31st, 1779, the following incendiary letter was found scattered through every street:—

MEN AND BROTHERS—Whoever shall find this letter will take it as a warning to meet at Leith Wynd on Wednesday next, to pull down that pillar of Popery, lately erected there.

(Signed) A PROTESTANT. P.S.—Please to read this carefully! keep it clean, and drop it somewhere else. Addressed to every Protestant into whose hands this shall come.

True to their word, only a little earlier than they had notified, did the Edinburgh mob assemble to carry out their programme. Late in the afternoon of Tuesday, 2nd February, the Bishop's house and chapel were surrounded by crowds mad with zeal and whiskey. The first intention of the rioters was to pull the building down piecemeal, and make a bonfire of the fragments; but their impatience getting the better of their instructions, they broke in the windows, and threw lighted torches into the apartments. A few moments and all was in a blaze, which, spreading to several adjoining houses, soon made a great conflagration.— While this was going on, the Lord Provost and magistrates, with the Deacon Convener of the trades, held a meeting in Goldsmiths' Hall, and passed a resolution to the following effect:—"That General Skene be applied to—that all tradesmen shall keep their servants and apprentices within doors—that the magistrates shall assemble at Fortune's tavern, and that the City guard shall patrol the streets!"— Meantime unopposed, the rioters repaired to the old Catholic chapel in Blackfriars Wynd, to which they set fire, as well as to half a dozen houses close by, taking care to beat down with crowbars the timber-work of the upper flats, so as to secure the entire destruction of these "nests of Popery." While thus engaged, a cry was raised, "To the traitors who have aided the Relief Bill," and catching at the inspiration of vengeance, the mob rushed forthwith to punish those who had ventured to show sympathy with the efforts of the Catholics to obtain some mitigation of their grievances. Robertson, McDonald, Lockhart, and Crosbie the advocate, were the four who had made themselves chiefly conspicuous for their courageous support of the oppressed; and to the houses of these gentlemen the rioters hastened to take ample revenge. They, however, had received timely warning of what they had to expect, and the mob on its arrival saw such preparations made for defence that they were compelled to content themselves with breaking a few windows. To console their disappointment, the rioters (now swelled to many thousands, and receiving hourly increase by the arrival of sympathizers from the outlying districts, and furthermore encouraged by the criminal apathy of the civil authorities) proceeded to fire the town in several places at once, spreading the intelligence as they poured along that the magistrates were against the Papists, and that the military had sworn not to discharge a single shot upon their fellow Protestants.

The danger that thus menaced themselves, their city, and all society, woke up the magistracy a little from their hitherto scandalous indifference. Some troops of dragoons were ordered into the town, the Duke of Buccleugh's fencibles were paraded before the mob, and a proclamation was issued by the Lord Provost;—this, for the moment, was all that the law found itself bound to do for the defence of property and life, in the very presence of raging conflagration, and of a vast body of seditious ruffians, bent upon nothing less than universal havoc and spoliation. The city firemen, when marched with their engines to the various scenes of destruction, refused to play upon the flames, "having no wish," as they said, "to take part with the Pope against the Protestants."

Fortunately for Edinburgh and its people, there existed at this time a body of shrewd, sensible men, the heads of the various city crafts. To the efforts of these it is due that the Modern Athens did not incur a fate similar to that which, eighteen months later, overwhelmed London. Moved by their representations, and by the certain assurance they gave him that unless the most energetic measures of repression were speedily adopted, Edinburgh would be soon nothing but a heap of ashes, the Provost and his advisers seemed at last to realize the danger, and to recognize their duties. Orders were issued to the troops to

fire upon any assemblage of men that refused to disperse after sufficient warning. At the same time another proclamation made its appearance, which, in spite of its unmanly cowardice, had the effect of convincing the rioters that their hour of impunity was past. It may not be amiss to rescue from oblivion this unworthy document. After humouring the mob by the assurance that no repeal should take place of any of the laws in force against the Papists, the proclamation continued thus:—

"After this public assertion, the magistrates will take most vigorous measures of repression, being satisfied that any future disorder will proceed only from the wicked views of bad men. The magistrates are aware that the riots have hitherto been due to the apprehensions of well-meaning people."

This disgraceful statement implied two singular circumstances:—first, that hitherto the civil power had not done its duty; and, secondly, that the rioters had been in a manner justified in their past acts of violence. Feeble and servile as it was, still, united to the order given to the troops to treat the town as being for a time under martial law, it met the emergency sufficiently. A few days, and Edinburgh had resumed its usual aspect.— The ruins of two chapels and of a score of houses, the presence of the military in the streets, the appearance of nineteen rioters (all of whom were, however, pardoned) before the magistrates—these were the only traces that seemed to remain of a conspiracy which had completely paralyzed the civil power, and had established a reign of terror over a city numbering 80,000 inhabitants.

In Parliament, the tampering policy of the Scotch magistracy during the no-Popery riots was made the subject of the severest animadversion; and in the debate of March 15th, 1779, the Lord Advocate for Scotland was reminded by Mr. Wilkes of the Scottish Catholic Relief Bill, and was asked whether he had come to the House prepared to fulfil the engagements he had made to "the most deserving and the most ill-treated of his Majesty's subjects." The answer of the Lord Advocate was that he had consulted the Catholics of Scotland, and had been informed that they deemed it more prudent, in the present excited condition of men's minds, to defer putting forward their claims—a reply that provoked this rejoinder from Wilkes: "It seems to be imagined that the Government of Great Britain is to be overruled in its administration of justice by whatever sentiment is uppermost amongst the scum of the population;" to which he added these ominous words: "The mob of Edinburgh has set a fatal example to that of London."

The "Committee for Protestant Interest," that had arranged the above plot, which, contrary to their intention and hopes, had only half succeeded, contrived nevertheless to be the authors of a more fatal disaster in England.— They stand before us branded with two especial disgraces—it was they who contrived the infamous penal code in Scotland, and from them came the suggestion of the formation of that society in England similar to their own, which, under the name of the "Protestant Association," was to bring about such terrible events. Indeed, some months before their own comparative failure, the Scotch zealots had resolved (to use their own phrase) "to come to the aid of their brethren in England;" and already their correspondence with the fanatics in London and other places was carried on with a regularity that told of a resolute and well concerted plan.

"The Protestant Association" had but one great object, namely, by every means, by sermons, by pamphlets, by placards, by street ballads, by alarming handbills, by the incessant rumours of a thousand impending dangers, to arouse throughout the kingdom a universal panic and indignation against the Catholic body. The end of this, they hoped, would be to terrify the Government into a repeal of Relief Bill, and the re-introduction of all the disabilities of the Code of William III.

Until the autumn of 1779, this diabolical Association worked on in secrecy. Its agents were everywhere—they penetrated into the lowest alleys, into the worst ale-houses—they were busy in the fourpenny debating clubs, and in the cellars where apprentices held belated meetings—among the sailors of Wapping, and the slaughterers of Newgate Market. For these, the lower, ignorant classes of society, the agents of the Association proclaimed the wildest follies: "The King and his Ministers were about to be assassinated by order of the Pope,"—there were "20,000 Jesuits hidden in the caves of Surrey, who were ready at a signal to blow up the banks and bed of the Thames, so as to drown London and Westminster." To the more sensible, better educated portion of the community, they spoke of the danger that would threaten the Protestant succession if the Papists acquired power—of the civil liberties so dearly bought by the Revolution, all of which the Catholics were bound by