

The Martyrs of the Scottish Reformation

By the late REV. WILLIAM HANNA, LL.D., Edinburgh.

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IN its earlier stages the Reformation was a purely spiritual movement. It originated in the breasts of a few saintly men, who, discovering in the Holy Scriptures, the long-buried truth of an immediate, an entire, and a gratuitous justification through Christ's finished work, embraced that truth with a living faith, and devoted themselves to its propagation. As the movement spread, questions as to the constitution, rites, and ceremonies of the church were brought into debate.

The civil power was appealed to, or of its own accord interfered; actors, actuated by many different motives, appeared on the stage, till what was at first so simple became complicated, - what at first had worn only a religious, assumed more or less of a political character. The distinction and the glory, of the Reformation in Scotland consists in this, that pure in its birth as in other lands, that purity was longer and more strictly preserved. It originated with the people, and not with the State, nor did the politician touch and defile it, till by a natural and unforced growth it had advanced to maturity, and had strength to establish itself in the land. It had early, too, to submit to the baptism of blood, and, by the fiery trial of persecution, the purity of its unsullied infancy had an additional protection thrown over it.

The first Scotchman who was honoured to seal his testimony to the reformed doctrine with his blood was Patrick Hamilton. Born in the highest walks of life, connected by birth with royalty itself, his boyhood held out to him the brightest prospects of worldly advancement. Being destined to the church, the Abbacy of Ferne was conferred on him before his education was finished, a foretaste of richer preferment's that were in store. But while still at college, Christ was revealed to him as the only and all-sufficient Saviour; and, with all the ardour of a youthful and most loving heart, he embraced the doctrines of the cross. He was suspected of heresy. In order to elude the jealous eye that he felt to be fastened on him, as well as to perfect himself in the knowledge of the truth, he had no sooner taken his Master's degree at St. Andrews than he crossed over to Germany, in 1524, in the twenty-first year of his age.

At Wittenberg he won at once the friendship of Luther and Melancthon. By their advice, and on the invitation of Francis Lambert, who had been placed at the head of the University, which Philip, Landgrave of Hesse, had recently erected in Marburg, he went there to assist Lambert in his important work. Here he was the first that set forth and publicly defended theses on the law and the gospel, on faith and works, in which the nature and office of each in the great scheme of redemption were enunciated with singular precision and force. Lambert became devotedly attached to him. "I can say of him most truly," such is the public testimony he bore, "that I have scarcely found another who could discourse with greater sincerity or spirituality concerning the Word of God." He did all he could to retain him as his coadjutor, but a deeper passion prevailed.

Being now thoroughly founded in the faith, Hamilton was seized with an unappeasable desire to communicate the truth to his fellow countrymen. Tearing himself away from these foreign ties, he returned in 1527 to his native land. No opportunity, public or private, was lost by him for publishing the free and full salvation that there is for every sinner in Christ. His youth, his station, his talents, his burning zeal, quickened curiosity, and lent efficacy to his words. It was but a brief period of labour that was allowed him. Summoned by the Archbishop to St. Andrews, he was examined before a large convocation of the clergy assembled there for that purpose. At the close of the conference, he was carried a prisoner to the castle, and condemned to be committed next day to the flames.

Though this had been the design of the prelate from the beginning, it had been carefully concealed. The preparations for the execution of the sentence had to be hurriedly made. A stake was fixed in front of the Old College; some wood and coals were heaped around it, and a train of gunpowder was laid. Having only had a few hours' notice of his approaching doom, the faithful martyr was carried to the spot. His eye rested on the fatal pile, but his faith never failed, nor did his fortitude for a moment forsake him.

Stripping himself of his outer garments, he handed them to his faithful servant, who accompanied him, saying, "These will not profit me in the fire, but they will profit thee. After this, of me you can receive no benefit, except the example of my death, which I pray thee bear in mind, for, albeit it be bitter to the flesh, and fearful before men, yet is it the entrance into eternal life, which none shall possess that deny Christ before this wicked generation."

The executioner bound him to the stake; the match was applied, the train exploded, but the wood and the coal remained unkindled; and his left side all scorched by the blaze, he had to wait till they ran for more ignitable materials to the castle, and heaped them up around him. A fire sufficient to consume at last was kindled, and through its smoke and flame, and above the noise of its crackling faggots, a clear, calm voice was heard, "Lord Jesus receive my spirit. How long shall darkness cover this land? How long shalt thou suffer this tyranny of men?"

The fire burned slow; his sufferings were protracted; but at last, the silver cord was loosed, and that spirit went to repeat its "How long, O Lord" among the souls beneath the altar. So perished, in the 24th year of his age, on the, 1st day of March, 1528, the proto-martyr of Protestantism in Scotland. The prelates hoped that by that prompt and terrible example they would check the progress of the truth. It spread with greater rapidity than ever. Alarmed at the unexpected result, they held many conferences. "My Lord," said one of his familiar friends to the Archbishop of St. Andrews, as he stood beside him in one of their conferences, "if ye burn any more, except ye follow my counsel, you will utterly destroy yourselves. If ye will burn them, let them be burnt in low cellars, for the reek of Master Patrick Hamilton has infected as many as it blew upon."

The sentence publicly pronounced against this first victim of Roman Catholic persecution has been preserved, and it may interest some of our readers to have before them the grounds upon which his judges proceeded. "We have found," say they, "that he hath affirmed, published, and taught diverse opinions of Luther and wicked heresies: that man hath no free will: that man is in sin so long as he liveth: that children after their baptism are sinners: all Christians that are worthy to be called Christians do know that they are in grace: no man is justified by works, but by faith only: good works make not a good man, but a good man doth make good works: that faith, hope, and charity are so knit, that he that hath the one hath the rest, and he that wanteth the one wanteth the rest: with divers other heresies and detestable opinions."

About six years afterwards, in the month of August, 1534, King James V, "all clothed in red," is sitting in state within the Abbey of Holyrood, with an imposing band of prelates and clergy. Two culprits stand before him for trial, accused of heresy. One of them is David Straiton, a gentleman of the house of

Lauriston. Thoughtless about the real matter of dispute, he had resisted and opposed the Papacy, simply because of his detestation of the pride and avarice of the clergy; Having a boat, in which his servants carried on a lucrative fishing, when a tithe of the produce was demanded by the Bishop of Moray, he bade his servants cast each tenth fish they caught into the sea, and then told the Bishop that if he would have his tithe, he must come, and take it for himself out of the same place where the stock was. For this and such like pieces of contempt, he was indicted to appear before the king on the charge of heresy. The charge led him to inquire; inquiry led to conviction. He sought and obtained many interviews with Erskine of Dun, whose conversation enlightened and strengthened him in the faith. His accusation was blessed to be the occasion of his conversion.

The head of his own house, the young laird of Lauriston, who had embraced the doctrines of the Reformation, reading to him one day out of the New Testament, came upon the passage, "Him that denieth me before men, him will I deny before my Father and his angels," Straiton suddenly threw himself upon his knees, stretched up both his hands, turned his eyes steadfastly to heaven, and, after the stillness of a moment or two, broke forth with the exclamation, "O Lord! I have been wicked; justly mightest thou take away thy grace from me; but, Lord, for thy mercy's sake, let me never deny thee nor thy truth for fear of death or corporal pain." The prayer of the suppliant was heard and answered. The day of his trial has at last come, - he stands before the king and that imposing assembly, - they take all pains to induce him to recant; but all in vain. Holding fast still the profession of his faith, the sentence of condemnation is pronounced.

He then throws himself on the mercy of the king. His evident sincerity, his manly bearing, strikes the monarch's heart. Willing to pardon, he turns to those haughty and cruel churchmen by him. "The king's hand is bound," they say; "he has no grace to give to such as our law has condemned." The very monarch has to bow to that stern yoke, and Straiton and his companions are led out instantly to execution, the place being chosen beside the cross of the Greenside, on a gentle eminence below the Calton Hill, "to the intent that the inhabitants of Fife, seeing the fire, might be shaken with terror and fear."

Looking from the place of Straiton's execution across the Firth of Forth, the eye rests upon the picturesque island of St. Colme's Inch, lying close in upon the Fifeshire coast. The monastery, whose ruins now grace that island, were then

entire. A few years before, the quiet of the abbey had been invaded by an unseemly quarrel which had broken out between the abbot and the canons. The latter complained of their allowance being less than was their due. To discover what their rights in the matter were, they got hold of the book of their foundation. Snatching the volume from them in haste, the abbot thrust another one into their hands instead. It was a volume of St. Augustine. It came into the hands of a young canon, named Thomas Forret, at that time a fervent Papist. "Oh, happy and blessed was that book!" - such was his frequent exclamation afterward.

That book led him to Christ. He tried then to lead others to the green pastures that he had discovered. With some of the younger canons he succeeded. But "the old bottles," he said, "would not receive the new wine." The superior of the abbey was informed of it. "Will you," said he to him, the kindly wish to protect mingling with the official condemnation, "will you keep your mind to yourself, and save yourself?" "I thank your lordship," was the young monk's answer; "you are a friend to my body, but not to my soul. Before I deny a word which I have spoken, you shall see this body of mine blown away first with the wind in ashes."

The kindly abbot winked at the delinquency, and was soon after relieved of his charge by the appointment of Forret as vicar of Dollar. His life and labours in the new charge were distinguished by primitive simplicity and apostolic zeal. Rising at six o'clock every morning, he pursued his theological studies till mid-day. The Bible took now the place of Augustine; and so precious did the Epistle to the Romans, in particular, appear to him, - so rich in materials for argument with those who set themselves against the truth, - that he committed to memory three chapters of it daily, getting his servant to hear him rehearse them before he went to bed, holding up his hands to heaven when he had done, and thanking God that that had not been an idle day.

He was sedulous in the visitation of his parish, and, in going among the houses of the poor, he carried always "bread and cheese in his gown sleeve," with which to relieve their wants. Finding such general and profound ignorance prevailing, he drew up a little catechism for the instruction of the young; and when he had any guest with him, into whose mind he wished, by gentlest method, to insinuate the truth, he called a child in and heard it repeat the answers. Every Sabbath a portion of the Bible was read in the church, and he preached to his people regularly in their own tongue. At that time this was

done only by the friars, who, through jealousy, accused him to his superior, the Bishop of Dunkeld.

The bishop summoned him before him. "My joy, Dean Thomas," said he, "I love you well, and, therefore, must give you my counsel how you shall rule and guide yourself." *Dean Thomas*, - "I thank your lordship heartily." *The Bishop*, - "My joy, I am informed that you preach the epistle or gospel every Sunday to your parishioners, and that you take not the cow¹ and the upmost cloth from them, which thing is very prejudicial to churchmen. And, therefore, my joy, Dean Thomas, I would you took your cow and upmost cloth as other churchmen do. And it is too much to preach every Sunday; for, in so doing, you may make the people think that we should preach likewise. But it is enough for you, when you find any good epistle, or any good gospel, that setteth forth the liberty of the holy church, to preach that." *Dean Thomas*, - "My lord, I think none of my parishioners will complain that I take not the cow nor the uppermost cloth. We agree right well, and there is no discord among us. And when your lordship biddeth me preach when I find any good epistle, or a good gospel, truly, my lord, I have read the New Testament and the Old, and all the epistles and gospels, and among them all I never could find any evil epistle or evil gospel. But if your lordship will show me the good and the evil epistle, then I shall preach the good and omit the evil." *The Bishop*, vehemently, - "I thank God that I never knew what the Old and the New Testament was! Therefore, Dean Thomas, I will know nothing but my breviary and my pontifical."

In such a jovial bishop's hand the life of the worthy vicar was in no great danger. But David Beaton had now become the Cardinal Archbishop of St. Andrews, and was hot in the pursuit of heresy. Forret and four others, of whom three were in orders, were tried, condemned, and executed on the Castle Hill of Edinburgh, on the 1st day of March, 1539. At the stake, addressing himself to the crowd, Forret was vindicating himself from the charge of denying Christ's presence in - the sacrament: "I never ministered the sacrament but I said, As the bread entereth into your mouth, so shall Christ dwell by living faith in your hearts." "Away, away!" cried one of the bishop's armed servitors who stood by, "we will have no preaching here." Then another servitor, plucking the New Testament from his bosom, held it up to the crowd, crying out, "Heresy! heresy!"

¹ The present of a cow, and of the uppermost cloth or coverlid of the bed. Given on the death of a parishioner.

That crowd, but too like another that stood around a nobler victim, shouted out: "Burn him! burn him!" Ceasing from man, the good vicar turned then to God, and cried with a loud voice, first in Latin, and then in English: "God be merciful to me a sinner! Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" And while still repeating the 51st Psalm, his gentle spirit passed into eternity.

The cardinal is not to stand alone. Other prelates must show themselves as zealous protectors of the church. The diocese of Glasgow must furnish the next victims. But Beaton cannot trust the bishop of that diocese. When he hears, then, that during the following summer work is to be done in the west, requiring a strong, unsparing hand to it, he despatches three trusty allies of his own to aid in its execution. The day for the trial of the heretics arrives, and there stand before the court two modest youths, - the elder of the two, Jerome Russel, a grey friar; the younger. Neil Kennedy, who, though but eighteen years of age, was already known for efforts in Scottish poetry rich in the promise of genius.

Both were of that meek and gentle temper with which lively intellect and fancy are so frequently combined. Kennedy, abashed before his judges, and clinging with the strong grasp of youth to life, falters for a moment. The thought of recantation enters and is entertained. It is but for a moment - the passing shadow of a cloud - next moment all is clearer, brighter, steadier within than ever. Beams of joy break from his expressive countenance, and, falling on his knees, he exclaims, "O Eternal God! how wonderful is this love and mercy! For even now, when I would have denied thee and thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ, thou by thine own hand hast pulled me out from the very bottom of hell, and made me feel that heavenly comfort which taketh from me that ungodly fear. Now I defy death. Do what you please. I praise my God that I am ready!" The cardinal had been right in his suspicions.

The Bishop of Glasgow, the presiding judge, began to relent. "I think it better," he says, "to spare these men than to put them to death." His coadjutors will not let him. "What will ye do, my lord" they vehemently exclaim. "Will ye condemn all that my Lord Cardinal, other bishops, and we have done? If so, you do, you then yourself are an enemy to the church and us; and so, we will report you, be you assured." Afraid, like Pilate, he gives up the innocent to the death.

And now it is the time for Jerome to assist and encourage his younger and weaker companion. "Brother," he says, as they go out together to the fire,

“fear not; more mighty is He that is in us than he that is in the world. The pain we shall suffer is short, and shall be light, but our joy and consolation shall never have an end. Death cannot destroy us, for it has been destroyed already by Him for whom we suffer.”

Alike in gentleness, alike in fortitude, alike in love, alike in the testimony they bear and the penalty they suffer, the two companion spirits pass that day together into paradise.