



MARTYRS' MONUMENT, STIRLING.

Scottish

THE WIGTOWN MARTYRS.

BY ROBERT DAWSON.

THE strong will and ready tact of the Tudor sovereigns kept the conflicting elements of English national life under control even when the spirit of the Reformation was wafting to our shores the living seed of the Word, which grew in many a good soil, and flourishing, ripened after many evil days.

With the Tudor dynasty passed away the feeling of national security, when the Scots became the fellow-subjects of the English on the accession of the Stuarts to the English throne. Inheriting absolute power in the English Church and State, the Stuarts were stimulated to acquire a similar arbitrary sway in Scotland. Both lands together were then divided into three great religious parties. Favouring Episcopalians as best suited to his purpose, the King resolved with their assistance to uproot Presbyterianism and firmly establish Episcopalianism in Presbyterian Scotland. With characteristic fervour and determination, this the Scots bitterly resented and opposed. In England, at the Restoration, Charles II. succeeded without a struggle to all the dangerous prerogatives of arbitrary power which, in his father's case, it had cost the nation so much blood and treasure to curtail and abolish. The Scottish spirit he resolved to subdue and enslave. Through Test and Abjuration oaths, he invaded the domain and stormed and polluted the shrine of conscience itself. By Acts of Parliament, decrees of Council, resolutions of Synod; by renegades, spies, dragoons; by imprisonment, fine, banishment; with rods, thumbkins, boots, gallows, water—and God knows what—he did his vile best to win or destroy both body and soul.

Margaret and Agnes Wilson, the daughters of Gilbert Wilson, farmer, Glenvernock, about thirteen miles from the town of Wigtown, were about eighteen and thirteen years of age respectively, when legal proceedings were taken against them for “disorderliness,” or withdrawing from the services of the established Episcopalian Church.

By an Act of Council, dated 11th October, 1666, and *passed in obedience to a royal letter*, masters were made answerable for their families and servants, and landlords were required to take bonds from their tenants in order to secure the regular attendance of the latter at the parish church, and to prevent them from attending “conventicles.”

In a list of withdrawers from public worship, subscribed by “James Colhoun,” curate of Penninghame parish, we find among others the names of the three children of Gilbert Wilson, Glenvernock: Margaret, Thomas, and Agnes.

By the "Five Mile Act" no "outed" Presbyterian minister could approach a corporate town with safety nearer than five miles. As a matter of fact, therefore, many religious meetings or conventicles were held on the moors and hill sides, and attended by thousands, who were liable to be shot, cut down, and scattered to the winds by the ever watchful dragoons. Many such meetings the young Wilsons had attended; so that the parental roof could be no longer a safe shelter for them. By a law as fixed as that by which the needle trembles to the pole, their hearts by faith were drawn in prayer to their only refuge—"To whom, Lord, can we go but unto Thee: Thou hast the words of eternal life?" "Master, 'we' will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest, 'drawing strength and encouragement even from Thy faithful warning': The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head." Hand in hand, through staggering fens, and shivering o'er the storm-swept moor, they fled to sheltering rock or cave among their wild native hills. There they lived and wandered as best they could, till February of 1685—the month in which the arch-enemy, Charles II., died—when Margaret and Agnes ventured to leave their wild retreats and secretly visit Wigtown, while Thomas, their brother, kept watch on the approaches to the hills.

Unfortunately, all their caution was in vain; for the poor girls were discovered, captured, and cast into prison. On the 13th of April, 1685, they, along with a woman of over sixty years of age, were brought to the bar of a Justiciary Court at Wigtown, and charged with rebellion at Bothwell Bridge and Airs Moss, and with attendance at some twenty field and twenty house conventicles.

The charge of rebellion was evidently absurd, and it was baseless; for none of the three had ever been within twenty miles of Bothwell Bridge or Airs Moss. All the same, *they were pronounced guilty, and condemned to be tied to stakes fixed in the sand within tide-mark, and there to stand till the flood overflowed and drowned them.*

Agnes, however, being under fourteen years, was soon afterwards released, on payment of a bond by her father to produce her when called for. Margaret, on the other hand, though repeatedly urged by her friends to take the abjuration oath and conform, refused to have liberty at such a price, and *continued steadfast in her refusal to the end.*

Accordingly, on the 11th day of May, 1685, Margaret Wilson and Margaret M'Lachlan were led forth to execution, which was carried out strictly in terms of their sentence.

Looking away from the shocking details of the tragedy, to the witness to the truth borne by those two noble martyrs, we see beyond, under the golden altar which is before the throne, the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held.