

JAMES THE SIXTH'S SEVERITY AGAINST PASQUIL WRITERS.

JAMES VI. could not endure any slight upon his kingly dignity, or any taunt against his personal character, or any dishonouring reflection upon places or events with which he imagined his good name to be in any degree identified; and he frequently inflicted most severe chastisement, and even the most terrible public punishments upon well-behaved individuals who, in some hour of unguardedness or of prurient wit, had uttered a speech, lampoon, or hard word against his kingly or personal or relative dignity. In August, 1596, John Dickson, an Englishman, was condemned to be hanged at the market cross of Edinburgh, for saying, in a fit of drunkenness, that James was a bastard king and not worthy to be obeyed. In October, 1600, Francis Tennent, a merchant burghess of Edinburgh, was condemned to suffer forfeiture of all his moveable goods and to be publicly strangled to death, for applying to the King the popular soubriquet of "the Son of Senior Davie," and writing some squibs against him which are described as "slandrous, calumnious, and reproachful," and which probably contained matter relative to the recent conspiracy of the Earl of Gowrie. In April, 1601, Archibald Cornwall, one of the town officers of Edinburgh, was condemned to suffer forfeiture of goods, lands, and life, and to be hanged with a paper declaring his crime on his forehead, for exhibiting a portrait of the King on the upright beams of the public gibbet in the course of a public auction,—an offence, not only exceedingly trivial, but probably originating

in pure accident or inadvertency or at worst in an unreflecting and foolish jest. And in May, 1615, John Fleming, an elder in Cockburnspath, was condemned to suffer forfeiture of all his moveable goods and to be hanged at the market-cross of Edinburgh, for "uttering treasonable, blasphemous, and damnable speeches against the King," the chief of which seems to have been a hasty petulant remark to his own parish minister, that "he cared not though the King should be dead before to-morrow, and should die of the falling sickness." All these cases are unquestionably authentic, and are detailed in Pitcairn's Criminal Trials; and a number of other cases of similar complexion might be quoted,—showing that James VI. was one of the most crushing and murdering tyrants, in matters connected with his own fame and dignity, who ever wielded power over the property and lives of a community. But the most remarkable case of all was the condemning of Thomas Ross to death, in 1618, for framing a pasquil against the Scottish nation.

Thomas Ross belonged to the ancient, influential, and highly respectable family of Ross of Craigie near Perth, who were probably a branch of the same sept as the ancient Earls of Ross. He was well educated, and became minister of Cargill, in the Presbyterian Church; but he seems to have embraced episcopacy, and to have gone to Oxford with the view of working his way into the clerical office in England; and he there sank into abject poverty, and contrived the extraordinary expedient of writing a pasquil against his native country as a means of pushing himself into notice, and procuring applause and ecclesiastical preferment. The very thought of such an expedient was crazy and wild,—and the prosecution of it pretty distinctly indicated a distempered state of mind; and no doubt existed among disinterested contemporaries who inquired into the circumstances, that he was really insane. Yet the thing might readily enough be suggested to him, and was even in some slight degree made

feasible, by the peculiar international condition of Scottish and English society. James VI. had not long before ascended the English throne; crowds of needy Scotsmen flocked into England, in hopes of promotion and aggrandizement through the influence of the King and of the Scottish courtiers; hot and angry jealousies existed on the part of the English people against the influx and the successes of the adventurers; the risks of feud and bloodshed, arising out of these jealousies, were so rife and fiery that a special enactment had been made by the legislature to curb and repress them; so that even a wise man, in a moment of need and irritation,—and much more an insane one—might, without any great extravagance, conceive the idea of trying to do something for himself in England by pasquinading the Scots.

Thomas Ross drew up his pasquil in the form of a thesis, and affixed it to the church-door of St. Mary's in Oxford. This was at that time the ordinary manner of procedure at all the great universities of Europe, on all sorts of subjects, and for all sorts of purposes; and, as practised by Ross, it simply constituted a challenge to a public disputation on the points which he specified. His pasquil, therefore, would be understood by all who might see it, as merely the squib of a wrangler or the flourish of a rhetorician, and not at all as a diatribe or an invective or an effusion of any kind of spleen. But it was not printed or disseminated; it was not even read throughout by any person but the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, to whom it was brought by a student; and it was taken down by that student immediately after it had been put up by Ross, and when the student had read only so much of it as to perceive its nature and tendency. Yet for this ridiculously mimic offence, committed by a starving madman, and devoid of all power to do the slightest harm to a single creature, the unhappy perpetrator was condemned to death by the "British Solomon," James VI.! And what adds immensely to the monstrousness of the affair is that, at the very

time when it happened, James was struggling to force episcopacy upon the Presbyterians of Scotland as the established religion of their country, while poor Ross had resigned his ministerial office in the Scottish Kirk, and become a zealous convert to the forms and tenets of the Church of England.

Ross was made prisoner in England, and sent in a ship to Scotland, to be put on his trial at Edinburgh; and on the 20th of August, he was formally convicted of "the devilish and detestable faining, blasphemous uttering, and publicly exposing of a villanous, infamous, and devilish pasquil or thesis, to the effect that all Scotsmen ought to be ejected from the Court of England, excepting his gracious Majesty, his son, and a very few others, and that Englishmen are mightily blinded, befooled, and deceived in suffering such an unprofitable and pernicious multitude and filthy offscourings of people to rage and domineer within their bounds." The justice who presided at the trial ordained him to be taken back to ward, and to be there kept in irons till the King should be informed of his conviction, and should intimate the punishment to be executed upon him; and on the 10th of September, in terms of a communication from the King to the Secretary of State, the sentence was pronounced, that Ross should be taken to a scaffold at the market-cross of Edinburgh, that there first his right hand and next his head should be struck from his body, that thereafter his hand should be fixed upon the West Port and his head upon the Netherbow-Port, and that all his moveable goods and gear, if he had any, should be escheated to his Majesty's use; and two days after, this most atrocious and inexpressibly infamous sentence was carried into execution.

"A very extraordinary instance of the same insane rage on the part of King James VI." says Mr. Pitcairn, "we learn from a rare poem entitled, a 'Counter-buffe to Lysimachus, Junior, calling himself a Jesuite;' quarto, 1640, pp. 16; where the fate of STERCOVIUS, a *Pole*, is alluded to. That

stranger had unhappily appeared in Scotland in the dress of his native country, which attracted the attention of the idle, and brought down upon him the derision and abuse of the populace.

‘ Hither he came, clad all in antique sort,
Where seen in streets the subject of a sport,
He soone became to childish gazers, who
With shrieks and clamours hiss him to and fro,
Till forced he was with shame and speed to pack him,
And to his feet and loathsome cabin take him!’

“Nettled at such rude and inhospitable treatment, he published ‘a Legend of Reproaches’ against the Scottish Nation, shortly after his return home; which, having reached the ears of his ‘most sacred Majesty,’ he procured the *arrest and execution* of the hapless STERCOVIUS! This out-herods Herod, with a vengeance! The death of this Pole was accomplished at an expense to the King of no less a sum than *six hundred pounds sterling*—an immense sum in those days. The instrument whom James employed was one *Mr. Patrik Gordon* a subject of Scotland, then resident in Poland. With a dexterity for which the sapient James was celebrated, he attempted to extort the price of this innocent man’s blood from the *Royal Burghs of Scotland!* It is believed, however, that he was foiled in that attempt, by the Privy Council declaring themselves incompetent judges of the matter.

“In a very curious Collection, privately printed at Edinburgh, 1828, ‘A Third Book of Scottish Pasquils,’ the cases of *Ross* and *Stercovius* are particularly noticed; and a copious extract from the ‘Counterbuffe’ is there given. That singular Poem introduces *Ross’s* story thus—which is enough for our present purpose.

. . . . ‘A Scot of ancient race,
A scholler, too, as thou art, lived a space

In England's Court; and for some private hate,
A Pasquil did against his country wreat,
As thou hast done in fouler sort; more full
Of vild aspersions from thy phrantick skull!
Well, then, King *James* of lasting memorie, who
Could not brook that any calumnie
Should be asperst upon his native land—
After some tryall there, he gave command
The Lybeller should home go, and sustaine
Of doom impartiall laws th' unpitied paine.
And here being tryed, judged, and adjudged, they fand
That he should lose his head and faultie hand;
Which straight was done, in public view—and so
I thinke the matter with thyself will go!”