

January Anniversary.



EXECUTION OF KING CHARLES I.

DEATH OF CHARLES I.

This "anniversary" of English history is one of the darkest, the deepest, and most impressive of any age or time; the death of Charles the First has a monumental record in our metropolis and more than a monumental record in the heart of posterity and the memories of reading men. Except those haunting themes of poetry presented in the life and death of Mary Queen of Scots, there are few subjects in English history—isolated, by their peculiar beauty and absorbing interest, from all meaner incidents—more noble in spirit, more touching in remembrance, more forcible in impression, and more absolutely appealing by their character to the imagination and very soul of the painter, than this of the last moments of the fate Monarch. The associations that crowd themselves into the memory with the characters which form the grouping of the scene—the recollection of events which immediately preceded it in the awful drama of the times—the shadows of a dark history passing in pageantry before the mind, with strange contrasted forms of rebellion and fidelity, of courage and cowardice, of virtue and treachery, of piety and blasphemy, of grace, loveliness, affection, with selfishness, ferocity and ambition: all the bad and good elements of humanity, in short, brought strikingly into play—these thoughts and memories, blending with the full inspiring awe and interest of the scene itself, lend it a pervading fervour and a deepened charm, and invest it with a sublime poetry that wears its intense beauty not more in the grand reality of the breathing picture, than in the visions and aspirations of the gazer's mind. The subject, too, possesses an universality, for the history of the death of Charles is one familiar to the ear of the world. It was a life-sacrifice extorted by the rage of a people, and given by its victim without shame or fear. Charles was, indeed, perhaps more a King upon the scaffold than in any other contingency of his disturbed unpeaceful life. His countenance was described by the poets and historians of that and after times as wearing a look of resignation most dignified and serene:—

No storm is in his human heart,
No strife upon his brow,
Where calmness, like a patient child,
Sits almost smiling now!
Seems the meek Monarch, as like one
Whose gentle spirit sings
Its song of solace to the soul
Before it spreads its wings!
And filling, ere it takes its flight,
His features with a holy light!

Yet that serenest heavenly look
Wears well its taint of earth;
And mortal majesty retains
The impress of its birth!
The lion doth not hang his mane,
The eagle droop his wing;
The lofty glance, the regal mien,
Fall only with the King;
And Charles's calm, unquailing eye
Shames all who thought he feared to die!

These last lines would seem to be derived from a sentence of D'Israeli's, with reference to the undignified assertions, then made by certain traitors, impugning the courage of their Monarch, "These mean spirits," says the eloquent writer "had flattered themselves that he who had been cradled in royalty—who had lived years in the fields of honour—and was now, they presumed, a recreant in imprisonment—the grand delinquent of England, as they called him—would start in horror at the block. This last triumph, at least, was not reserved for them; it was for the King." The triumph depicted here, however, is loftier than that of mere human exultation, which both poet and historian imply; it is the high, pure, simple, truth of virtue—mild in the eye, bland upon the brow, gentle in the utterance; it is the triumph of the good spirit pouring forth, to a world it would console rather than rebuke, its parting consciousness of peace: "I go from a corruptible to an incorruptible crown, where no disturbance can have place." These holy words convey the whole strength and meaning of the Monarch's attitude and features.

The immediate act of the execution has thus been forcibly described:—"Men could discover in the King no indecent haste or flurry of spirits—no trembling of limbs—no disorder of speech—no start of horror. The blow was struck. An universal groan, as it were—a supernatural voice—the like never before heard, broke forth from the dense and countless multitude. All near the scaffold pressed forward to gratify their opposite feelings by some memorial of his blood—the blood of a tyrant or a martyr! The troops immediately dispersed on all sides the mournful or the agitated people."

The following verse from a poem published on the subject, in the *Times Newspaper*, is a sort of paraphrase of Hume's account of the immediate consequences of Charles's execution.

A few brief moments and the martyr dies:
Dies in that sweet serenity of soul!
Then rush quick tears into the nation's eyes
Over all hearts Grief's sudden waters roll,
And Sorrow raves and sobs without control!
Now brave men's spirits are bow'd down to earth,
Slender is hushed, and vengeance droops her wing,
And women give their babes untimely birth,
Shock'd at the murder of their honoured King!
And misery flings her mourning over mirth,
And fame (too late) is loud with the lost Monarch's worth.

* See Hume.