

He did not speak the name of Stratford of those who heard, or afterwards read, his words there was no need to be more explicit.

Passing now to his duties as a Christian, he declared that he had forgiven all the world, "and even those in particular that have been the chief causes of my death: who they are, God knows, I do not desire to know, I pray God forgive them." It was a strange statement to make, but true. During these last weeks he had never seen or spoken to any of the chief commanders of the Army. Fairfax and Cromwell, and Ireton, the three whom he had come to know eighteen months before when he had negotiated with them, at Hampton Court had not confronted him since he became their prisoner. He had been a prisoner, cut off from the world, communicating only with lesser men and underlings, Ewer and Rolfe, Harrison and Whidcot, Tomlinson and Hacker. At his trial he had been judged, and prosecuted by Bradshaw and Cook, two obscure lawyers neither of whom he had ever heard of before. "The chief causes of my death, who they are, God knows. . . ." He could have made a very good guess, but it was true that he did not, absolutely, know. All these men who stood round him now, and would in a few minutes, in cold blood, murder him—they were instruments merely. But the hidden enemies they had finally destroyed him, who and where were they? Fairfax? Cromwell? Ireton?

He went on: "I wish that they may repent, for indeed they have committed a great sin in that particular; I pray God, with St. Stephen, that this be not laid to their charge. Nay, not only so, but that they may take the right way to the peace of the Kingdom: for my charity commands me not only to forgive particular men, but my charity commands me to endeavour

so we last grasp the peace of the Kingdom. So, Sir, I do wish with all my soul, (and I do hope there is some here will carry it further) that they may endeavour the peace of the Kingdom."

He looked towards the clerks who were busy taking notes, then went on with great composure to instruct his enemies in politics. They would achieve nothing by unjust conquest; they must learn to know their duty to God, the King—"that is, my successors"—and the people. They should call a national council to settle the affairs of the Church. "As for the King—" He broke off short, for one of the officers on the scaffold, happened by accident to touch the axe. "Hurt not the axe," said the King, "that may hurt me."

He resumed. Their duty to the king was clearly laid down in the known laws of the land. Then he came to the people: "Truly I desire their liberty and freedom as much as anybody whomsoever; but I must tell you their liberty and freedom consists in having of government, those laws by which their life and their goods may be most their own. It is not for having a share in government, Sir, that is nothing pertaining to them. A subject and a sovereign are clear different things. . . . Sirs, it was for this that now I am come here. If I would have given way to an arbitrary way, for to have all laws changed according to the power of the sword, I needed not to have come here; and therefore I tell you (and I pray God it be not laid to your charge) that I am the Martyr of the people."

He added a regret that he had had so little time to put his thoughts into better order, and would have concluded there, had not Juxon reminded him that "for the world's satisfaction" he should make some statement about his religion. It was true that in putting forward this last eloquent claim that he died for the

liberties of his people, he had "almost forgotten" (his own words) to vindicate himself and his Church from the accusation of Popery. He now solemnly attested "that I die a Christian according to the profession of the Church of England, as I found it left me by my father. . . . I have a good Cause and I have a gracious God; I will say no more."

He turned now to speak to the grotesque figures by the block. For some reason, perhaps out of nervous forgetfulness, the executioner did not go through the usual formula of asking for, and receiving the forgiveness of his victim.⁸⁸ There is, in no account, any indication that these words were said. The King explained that he would pray briefly and then sign for him to strike. He also asked how he should arrange his hair not to impede the axe. Then with the help of Juxon, he put on his cap and pushed his hair underneath it.

"There is but one stage more," said Juxon, "which though turbulent and troublesome, yet it is a very short one; you may consider it will soon carry you a very great way; it will carry you from Earth to Heaven; and there you shall find, to your great joy, the prize you hasten to, a Crown of Glory."

The King replied: "I go from a corruptible to an incorruptible Crown, where no disturbance can be, no disturbance in the world."

He now took off his George, the insignia of the Garter, the last of his jewels and gave it to the Bishop with the one word "Remember."

He took off his doublet, and for a moment resumed his cloak, against the bitter cold. Looking at the block he asked if it was set fast, and again regretted that it was no higher. The reason for the low block was to make the execution easier to perform if he had offered

any resistance. The executioner was, naturally, unwilling to explain this. "It can be no higher, Sir," was all he said.

The King stood for a moment raising his hands and eyes to Heaven and praying in silence, then slipped off his cloak and lay down with his neck on the block. The executioner bent down to make sure that his hair was not in the way, and Charles, thinking that he was preparing to strike, said, "Stay for the sign."

"I will, an' it please Your Majesty," said the executioner.

A fearful silence had now fallen on the little knot of people on the scaffold, on the surrounding troops, and on the crowd. Within a few seconds the King stretched out his hands and the executioner on the instant and at one blow severed his head from his body.⁸⁹

A boy of seventeen, standing a long way off in the throng, saw the axe fall. He would remember as long as he lived the sound that broke from the crowd, "such a groan as I never heard before, and desire I may never hear again."⁹⁰