

**AFTER THE BATTLE OF SEDGMOOR AND
"THE BLOODY ASSIZE" — BRIDGWATER LEFT
TO THE MERCY OF KIRKE'S LAMBS — A
PAINFUL EPISODE — ARRIVAL OF JUDGE
JEFFREYS — COPY OF HIS WARRANT — HIS
INHUMAN CONDUCT — RESULT OF THE
TRIALS.**

WHEN Feversham left the neighbourhood of Bridgwater after the battle of Sedgmoor he left behind him in command at Bridgwater Colonel Percy Kirke, a military adventurer, who had for some years commanded a garrison at Tangiers. He is described as licentious, rapacious and cruel, and certainly he betrayed all those characteristics at Bridgwater. When his soldiers displeased him he flogged them without mercy, but he indemnified them by allowing them to sleep when on watch, to reel drunk about the streets, and to rob, beat and insult the inhabitants. They bore on their flag a Christian emblem, the Paschal Lamb, and with a bitterly ironical meaning these rude and ferocious fellows were better known as "*Kirke's Lambs*." Kirke hung nineteen or twenty persons as soon as he was left in command, and he caused their bowels to be burnt and their remains to be boiled in pitch, and portions affixed in various streets of the town and in all the roads leading from it. This execution was followed by several others of a like kind. Kirke afterwards visited Taunton, and ordered several executions there. It is stated that he and his officers caroused whilst executions were taking place, and that at every health which was drunk a poor wretch was strung up. When the legs of the dying men quivered in their last agony the Colonel ordered the drums to strike up, to give the rebels, as he said, music to their dancing! So many dead bodies were quartered that on one occasion the executioner — pressed into the terrible Service — stood ankle deep in blood. One poor fellow who was suspected by Kirke was made to boil the quarters of some of his friends in pitch, and when he returned to his native village he was ever afterwards known as "*Tom Boilman*." It is related that some years afterwards he was struck dead by lightning in a thunderstorm.

Cruelty was not Kirke's only passion; avarice and extortion went hand in hand with him. For monetary considerations he allowed great numbers of fugitives from Sedgmoor to escape from the country. One particularly disgraceful story is told with regard to him. Whilst quartered at the "*Old Swan*," on the Cornhill (where most of the butchery took

place), a young lady of great beauty went to him and beseeched the life of one of the prisoners, to whom she was much attached. He conquered her virtue by promising to spare the life she asked, but when she had yielded the inhuman wretch led her to the window overlooking the Cornhill, where she saw him for whose sake she had just sacrificed her honour in the last throes of death on a gallows. This painful episode has formed the subject of more than one poem.

Ultimately, when all the gaols in Somerset and Dorset were crowded with prisoners, Kirke was withdrawn, and early in September Jeffreys set out on that circuit of which the memory will last as long as our race and language, handed down in history as "*The Bloody Assize*." "*He made all the West*," says Fox (in his *Life of James II.*) "*an aceldama; some places he quite depopulated, and nothing was to be seen in them but forsaken walls, unlucky gibbets, and ghastly carcases. The trees were loaded almost as thick with quarters as with leaves, the houses and steeples covered as close with heads as at other times in that county with crows or ravens. Nothing could be more like hell than all those parts; nothing so like the devil as he. Caldrons hissing, carcases boiling, pitch and tar sparkling and glowing, blood and limbs boiling and tearing and mangling.*" He was very precise in his order to the sheriff to provide the means requisite for his horrible cruelties, as will be seen from the following document, sent by Jeffreys' command to the authorities of Bridgwater, by the sheriff:— "*Somersetshire. — Edward Hobbes, sherreife of ye countie aforesaid, to the constables and other of his Majestie's officers, greeting. Whereas I have received a warrant under the hands and seale of the Right Honourable the Lord Jeffreys for execution of severall rebels within yor said burrough, these are therefore to will and require yow immediately on sight hereof to erect a gallows in the most publike place of yor said burrough, to hang the said traytors on, and that you provide halters to hang them with, a sufficient number of faggots to burne the bowells of the fowersaid traytors, and a furnace or caldron to boyle their heads and quarters and salt to boyle therewith, half a bushel to each traytor, and tarr to tarr ym with, and a sufficient number of speares and poles to fix and place their heads and quarters; and that you warne the owners of nine oxen to be ready with a dray and wayne and the said oxen, the time hereafter mencioned for execution, and yow yorselves, togeather with a guard of fortiable men at the least to be present on Wednesday morning next by eight of the clock, to be aiding and assisting to me or my deputie to see the said*

rebells executed. Yow are alsoe to provide an axe and a cleaver for the quartering the said rebells."

The house where Jeffreys lodged whilst trying the prisoners at Bridgwater is still standing; it is said he chose it that he might see his sentences carried into effect on the Cornhill.

About 260 were condemned and executed on this assize, besides which a great number were allowed their lives on payment of heavy ransoms, whilst 841 others were sent into transportation. Mary Blake and the other young ladies who had presented the colours to the ill-fated Duke, were treated with much harshness. Miss Blake was committed to prison, and died there, but the remainder were let off on payment of a sum of about two thousand pounds, money which went to the maids of honour in court. One of them presented herself at the bar and begged mercy of Jeffreys. "Take her, jailor!" thundered the judge, with one of those diabolical looks which had often struck terror into stouter hearts than hers. The poor girl burst into a fit of sobbing, was taken back to gaol, fell ill of the fright, and in a few hours died. At the request of the Queen one hundred of the rebels were made over to her, and she made a profit on their transportation of a thousand guineas.

There is only record of eleven persons having been hung at the assizes in Bridgwater, their names being: Robert Francis, Richard Harris, Josiah Bellamy, Nicholas Stodghill, Richard Engram, John Trott, William Moggeridge, Robert Gruppy, John Hurman, Josiah Davis, and Robert Roper. One of the condemned, Roger Hoar, a merchant, was led to the gallows, but was then let off on payment of a thousand pounds. He lived to be Mayor of the town, in 1692, and is now buried in St. Mary's churchyard.

At length the inhuman Jeffreys finished his work, and vauntingly boasted that he had hung more traitors than all the Judges since William the Conqueror. The hatred by which he was regarded by the people of Somersetshire has scarcely a parallel in history. It is related that when he had been many years dead, when his name and title were extinct, his granddaughter, the Countess of Pomfret, travelling along one of our high roads, was insulted by the populace, and found that she could not safely venture herself among the descendants of those who had witnessed the Bloody Assize.

The year following the battle (1686) King

James II. paid a visit to the spot where the sanguinary struggle had taken place. The following extract is taken from the *London Gazette* of August 30, 1686:—

Bridgwater, Aug. 27. — His Majesty parted from Bristol about six this morning, having there, as likewise at Marlborough, touched a great number of people who had the evil. About five this afternoon his Majesty arrived here, viewing in his passage Weston Moor. The Mayor and Aldermen of this place, in their formalities, attended his Majesty, and the people followed his Majesty with continued acclamations.

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