Speech of Robert Emmet.

MY LORDS,—What have I to say that sentence of death should not be passed on me according to law? I have nothing to say that can alter your predetermination, nor that will become me to say, with any view to the mitigation of that sentence which you are here to pronounce, and I must abide by. But I have that to say, which interests me more than life, and which you have laboured (as was necessarily your office in the present circumstances of this oppressed country) to destroy. I have much to say, why my reputation should be rescued from the load of false accusation and calumny which has been heaped upon it. I do not imagine that, seated where you are, your minds can be so free from impurity as to receive the least impression from what I am going to utter. I have no hopes that I can anchor my character in the breast of a Court constituted and trammelled as this is. I only wish, and it is the utmost I expect, that your Lordships may suffer it to float down your memories untainted by the foul breath of prejudice, until it finds some more hospitable harbour to shelter it from the storm by which it is at present buffeted.

Were I only to suffer death, after being adjudged guilty by your tribunal, I should bow in silence, and meet the fate that awaits me without a murmur; but the sentence of the law which delivers my body to the executioner, will, through the ministry of that law, labour in its own vindication to consign my character to obloquy; for there must be guilt somewhere, whether in the sentence of the Court or in the catastrophe, posterity must determine. A man in my situation, my lords, has not only to encounter the difficulties of fortune, and the force of power over minds which it has corrupted or subjugated, but the difficulties of established prejudice; the man dies, but his memory lives. That mine may not perish—that it may live in the respect of my countrymen, I seize upon this opportunity to vindicate myself from some of the charges alleged against me. When my spirit shall be wafted to a more friendly port—when my shade shall have joined the bands of those martyred heroes who have shed their blood on the scaffold and in the field, in defence of their country and of virtue, this is my hope—I wish that my memory and name may animate those who survive me, while I look down with complacency on the destruction of that perfidious Government which upholds its domination by the blasphemy of the Most High; which displays its power over man as over the beasts of the forest; which sets man upon his brother, and lifts his hand in the name of God, against the throat of his fellow who believes or doubts a little more than the Government standard—a Government steeled to barbarity by the cries of the orphans and the tears of the widows which it has made.

[Here Lord Norbury interrupted Mr. Emmet; saying, that the mean and wicked enthusiasts who felt as he did were not equal to the accomplishment of their wild designs.]

I appeal to the Immaculate God. I swear by the throne of Heaven—before which I must shortly appear—by the blood of the murdered patriots who have gone before me, that my conduct has been, through all this peril and through all my purposes, governed only by the convictions which I have uttered, and by no other view than that of their cure, and the emancipation of my country from the superinhuman oppression under which she has so long and too patiently travailed; and I confidently and assuredly hope that wild and chimerical as it may appear, there is still union and strength in Ireland to accomplish this most noble enterprise.

Of this I speak with the confidence of immense knowledge, and with the consolation that appertains to that confidence. Think not, my lords, I say this for the petty gratification of giving you a transitory uneasiness; a man who never yet raised his voice to assert a lie will not hazard his character with posterity by asserting a falsehood on a subject so important to his country, and on an occasion like this. Yes, my lords, a man who does not wish to have his epitaph written until his country is liberated, will not leave a weapon in the power of envy, nor a pretence to impeach the probity which he means to preserve even in the grave to which tyranny consigns him.

[Here he was again interrupted by the Court.]

Again, I say, what I have spoken was not intended for your lordships, whose situation I commiserate rather than envy—my expressions were for my countrymen; if there is an Irishman present, let my last words cheer him in the hour of affliction.

[Here he was again interrupted. Lord Norbury said he did not sit there to hear treason.]

I have always understood it to be the duty of a judge, when a prisoner has been convicted, to pronounce the sentence of the law; I have also understood the judges sometimes think it their duty to hear with patience, and to speak with humanity, to exhort the victims of the laws, and to offer with tender benignity their opinions of the motives by which he was actuated in the crime of which he was adjudged guilty. That a judge has thought it his duty so to have done, I have no doubt; but where is the boasted freedom of your institutions? Where is the vaunted impartiality, clemency, and mildness of your Courts of Justice, if an unfortunate prisoner, whom your policy, and not your justice, is about to deliver into the hands of the executioner, is not suffered to explain his motives sincerely and truly, and to vindicate the principles by which he was actuated?

My lords, it may be a part of the system of angry justice to bow a man's mind by humiliation to the proposed ignominy of the scaffold—but worse to me than the purposed shame, or the scaffold's terrors, would be the shame of such foul and unfounded imputations as have been laid against me in this Court. You, my lord, are a judge; I am the supposed culprit; I am a man, you are a man also: by a revolution of power we might change places, though we never could characters. If I stand at the bar of this Court, and dare not vindicate my character, what a farce is your justice! If I stand at this bar and dare not vindicate my character, how dare you calumniate it? Does the sentence of death, which your unhallowed policy inflicts on my body, also condemn my tongue to silence and my reputation to reproach? Your executioner may abridge the period of my existence, but whilst I exist I shall not forbear to vindicate my character and motives from your aspersions; and as a man, to whom fame is dearer than life, I will make the last use of that life in doing justice to that reputation which is to live after me, and which is the only legacy I can leave to those I honour and love, and for whom I am proud to perish.

As men, my lords, we must appear on the great day at one common tribunal, and it will then remain for the Searcher of all hearts to show a collective universe, who was engaged in the most virtuous actions or attached by the purest motives—by the country's oppressors, or—

[Here he was again interrupted, and told to listen to the sentence of the law.]

My lords, will a dying man be denied the legal privilege of exculpating himself in the eyes of the community of an undeserved reproach thrown upon him during his trial, by charging him with ambition, and attempting to cast away, for a paltry consideration, the liberties of his country? Why did your lordships insult me? or rather, why insult justice in demanding of me why sentence of death should not be pronounced? I know, my lord, that form prescribes that you should ask the question—the form also prescribes the right of answering. This, no doubt, may be dispensed with, and so might the whole ceremony of the trial, since sentence was already pronounced at the Castle before the jury was empannelled. Your lordships are but the priests of the oracle, and I submit; but I insist on the whole of the forms.

[Here the Court desired him to proceed.]

I am charged with being an emissary of France. An emissary of France! and for what end? It is alleged I wish to sell the independence of my country! and for what end? Was this the object of my ambition?—and is this the mode by which a tribunal of justice reconciles contradictions? No, I am no emissary; and my ambition was to hold a place among the deliverers of my country—not in power, not in profit, but in the glory of the achievement. Sell my country's independence! and for what? Was it for a change of masters? No, but for ambition! Oh, my country! was it personal ambition that could influence me? Had it been the soul of my actions, could I not, by my education and fortune—by the rank and consideration of my family—have placed myself among the proudest of my oppressors? My country was my idol; to it I sacrificed every selfish, every endearing sentiment, and for it I now offer up my life. O God! No, my lord; I acted as an Irishman, determined on delivering his country from the yoke of a domestic faction, which is its joint partner and perpetrator in the parricide, for the ignominy of existing with an exterior of splendour and a conscious depravity: it was the wish of my heart to extricate my country from the doubly-riveted despotism. I wished to place her independence beyond the reach of any power on earth—I wished to exalt her to that proud station in the world.

Connections with France were indeed intended—but only as far as mutual interest would sanction or require. Were they to assume any authority inconsistent with the purest independence, it would be the signal for its destruction; we sought aid, and we sought it as we had assurance we should obtain it—as auxiliaries in war and allies in peace.

Were the French to come as invaders or enemies, uninvited by the wishes of the people, I should oppose them to the utmost of my strength. Yes, my countrymen, I should advise you to meet them on the beach with a sword in one hand and a torch in the other; I would meet them with all the destructive fury of war, and I would animate my countrymen to immolate them in their boats, before they had contaminated the soil of my country. If they succeeded in landing, and if forced to retire before superior discipline, I would dispute every inch of ground, burn every blade of grass, and the last entrenchment of liberty should be my grave. What I could not do myself, if I should fall, I should leave as a last charge to my countrymen to accomplish, because I should feel conscious that life any more than death is unprofitable when a foreign nation holds my country in subjection.

But it was not an enemy that the succours of France were to land. I looked indeed for the succours of France; but I wished to prove to France and to the world, that Irishmen deserved to be assisted; that they were indignant at slavery, and ready to assert the right and independence of their country.

I wished to procure for my country the guarantee which Washington procured for America. To procure an aid which by its example would be as important as its valour—disciplined, gallant, pregnant with science and experience; who would perceive the good and polish the rough points of our character; they would come to us as strangers and leave us as friends, after sharing our perils and elevating our destiny. These were my objects—not to receive new taskmasters, but to expel old tyrants. These were my views, and these only became Irishmen. It was for these ends I sought aid from France, because France, even as an enemy, could not be more implacable than the enemy already in the bosom of my country.

[Here he was interrupted by the Court.]

I have been charged with that importance in the efforts to emancipate my country as to be considered the keystone of the combination of Irishmen, or, as your lordship expressed it, "the life and blood of the conspiracy;" you do me honour over much; you have given to the solution all the credit of a superior. There are men engaged in the conspiracy who are not only superior to me, but even to your own estimation of yourself, my lord; before the splendour of whose genius and virtues I should bow with respectful deference, and who would think themselves dishonoured to be called your friends; who would not disgrace themselves by shaking your blood-stained hand.

[Here he was interrupted.]

What, my lord! shall you tell me on the passage to that scaffold, which the tyranny of which you are only the intermediary executioner has erected for my murder, that I am accountable for all the blood that has and will be shed in this struggle of the oppressed against the oppressor? Shall you tell me this, and shall I be so very a slave as not to repel it?

I do not fear to approach the Omnipotent Judge, to answer for the conduct of my whole life, and am I to be appalled and falsified by a mere remnant of mortality here? By you, too, who, if it were possible to collect all the innocent blood that you have shed in your unhallowed ministry in one great reservoir, your lordship might swim in it.

[Here the Judge interfered.]

Let no man dare, when I am dead, to charge me with dishonour; let no man attaint my memory, by believing that I could have engaged in any cause but of my country's liberty and independence, or that I became the pliant minion of power in the oppression of the miseries of my countrymen. The proclamation of the Provisional Government speaks for our views; no inference can be tortured from it to countenance barbarity or debasement at home, or subjection, humiliation, or treachery from abroad. I would not have submitted to a foreign oppressor for the same reason that I would resist the present domestic oppressor. In the dignity of freedom, I would have fought on the threshold of my country, and its enemy should only enter by passing over my lifeless corpse. And am I, who lived but for my country, and who have subjected myself to the dangers of a jealous and watchful oppressor and the bondage of the grave, only to give my countrymen their rights, and my country their independence—am I to be loaded with calumny, and not suffered to resent or repel it? No, God forbid!

If the spirits of the illustrious dead participate in the concern and cares of those who are dear to them in this transitory life, O ever dear and venerable shade of my departed father, look down with scrutiny upon the conduct of your suffering son, and see if I have ever for a moment deviated from those principles of morality and patriotism which it was your care to instil into my youthful mind, and for which I am now to offer up my life.

My lords, you are impatient for the sacrifice—the blood which you seek is not congealed by the artificial terrors that surround your victim; it circulates warmly and unrifled through the channels which God created for nobler purposes, but which you are bent to destroy for purposes so grievous that they cry to Heaven. Be ye patient! I have but a few words more to say. I am going to my cold and silent grave; my lamp of life is nearly extinguished; my race is run; the grave opens to receive me, and I sink into its bosom! I have but one request to ask at my departure from this world; it is the charity of its silence! Let no man write my epitaph; for as no man who knows my motives dare now vindicate them, let not prejudice or ignorance asperse them. Let them and me repose in obscurity and peace, and my tomb remain uninscribed, until other times and other men can do justice to my character. When my country takes her place among the nations of the earth—then, and not till then—let my epitaph be written. I HAVE DONE.