

Spring 1928

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Recommended Citation

William Renwick Riddell, Death of King James I--A Medico-Legal Study, The, 19 *Am. Inst. Crim. L. & Criminology* 30 (1928-1929)

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THE DEATH OF KING JAMES I

A Medico-legal Study

WILLIAM RENWICK RIDDELL,¹ LL. D., D. C. L., ETC.

James Stuart, King James I of England and VI of Scotland, was a very complex character: well-read, even learned as learning went on those days, he was superstitious to a degree, firmly believing in witchcraft and sorcery; physically an abject coward, trembling like a leaf at the sight of a drawn sword, a characteristic supposed to have been due to pre-natal influences, as the indignant Scottish Lords, in her presence, slew with their daggers a few months before his birth the Italian favorite of his mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, then carrying him under her heart, he was, nevertheless, brave to a fault in having his way in the administration of public affairs, thereby laying the foundation for the tragedy of Whitehall in 1649; stubbornly supporting his friends and favorites in many of their worst measures, he deserted them without a qualm without any real cause and while apparently treating them with the old affection; a master of King-craft, he was most easily deceived by the simplest trick; "the Scottish Solomon" was the "wisest Fool in Christendom," a living paradox, a puzzle to his own age and to those which were to follow.

The purpose of this paper is to say something concerning what was once a burning question and might have caused the destruction of a man of great prominence, had not the assassin's stroke intervened to prevent by one tragedy, the possibility of another, when in 1628, John Felton's knife struck down the Duke of Buckingham at Portsmouth and thus averted the headman's axe.

King James lay at Theobald's suffering with a "tertian ague"—our malaria, the "fever'n'ager" or "Country fever" so well known to a former generation of Canadians, now known to be due to the bite of a mosquito but then supposed to come from swamp air, malarious air or, indeed, even night air. Ague was one of, or rather a generic name applied to all, the non-pestilential fevers; these were in the extraordinary and perverse science of the olden days not caused by the putrefaction in the heart or its contents like pestilential fevers, but by certain putrid vapors carried to the heart and inflaming heart and contents but not putrefying either—for which, all may consult

¹Justice of Appeal of Ontario.

the *De Morbis Contagiosis et eorum curatione* of old Hieronymus Fracastorius, Lib. II, Cap. III.

To the King, lying sick, George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham brought a posset which the King drank and a plaster which was applied to his body; the King shortly afterwards died.

When, in 1626, after the succession to the throne of Charles I, the Commons came to impeach Buckingham, one of the Articles of Impeachment, No. XIII, was based upon this conduct of the accused. It is all very well to laugh at such a charge now, but it was different in those days when any charge however trivial might be laid hold of to destroy a political opponent—*nous avons changé tout cela*, of course.

The facts of the administering of these remedies are not clear; Mr. Wandesford who had been deputed to speak for the prosecution, opened on the enormity of the unskillful presuming to exercise and practice physic even on common persons, branding them as “*improbos, ambitiosos, temerarios, et audaces homines*”—we still have some of that kind. But to dare to practise on the King was much worse; the Royal Physicians themselves were sometimes afraid to try an unusual or, indeed, any medicine on the sacred body—he mentioned for an example that when in 1453, 32 Henry VI, the King was sick, “John Arundel and others, the king’s physicians, and surgeons thought it not safe for them to administer anything to the king’s person without the assent of the Privy Council first obtained an express license under the Great Seal of England.” Nor can it be said that Arundel was not wise in this precaution; he was, of course, the Bishop of Chichester, who was domestic chaplain and confessor to Henry VI, and was one of the four physicians entrusted with the king’s health: we are told that there was violent suspicion that the king died of foul play, and that his body was exposed at St. Paul’s “that every man might see him.” It could hardly be charged against Arundel that he desired his master’s death, as at the time Henry was pressing with the utmost vigor, Arundel’s claims to the See of Durham; but no one could be sure in those days what an opponent in church or state might say.

Wandesford alleged that that suspicious plaster had “a strange smell and an infective quality striking the malignity of the disease inward, which nature otherwise might have expelled outward” (we have not yet got over bringing the measles out and keeping them from going inwards). He also said that the king after taking two drinks of the posset, refused a third, and that the king himself on a relapse

setting in said it was not from cold taken or some other ordinary cause but "it is that which I had from Buckingham."

The charge was made that these medicines had been obtained by Buckingham's mother who was notoriously given to irregular practices in medicine, and administered by Buckingham to effect the king's death. Buckingham, himself, told a plain story and one which bears the imprint of truth: he says that although the Royal Physicians had expressly forbidden any drink to be given to the king except what they prescribed themselves, the king knowing that Buckingham had recovered from a similar ague a short time before, asked him how he had recovered and what did him most good. Buckingham told him that one who had been the Earl of Warwick's physician had administered a plaster and posset-drink to him, and he wished that the king had taken the same at the beginning of his sickness; thereupon the king was very desirous to have the posset-drink and the plaster; Buckingham delayed sending for them, and the king, himself, sent J. Baker, Buckingham's servant for them; Buckingham "besought his majesty not to make use of it but by the advice of his own physicians, nor until it should be tried by James Palmer of his bed-chamber, who was then sick of an ague and upon two children of the town, and this the king said he would do" (This is, of course, the old medical rule with untried medicines: *Fiat experientum in corpore viti*, try it on an inferior.) The Duke left for London, and in his absence, the "plaster and posset-drink were brought and applied by his late majesty's own command."

He said further that when he afterwards visited the king and told him that there was "a rumour as if his physic had done the king hurt and that the duke had administered that physic to him without advice . . . ," the king "with much discontent answered thus: They are worse than devils that say it." This might all be true and yet the king know that he had taken harm from the unauthorized medicine; James was such a liar and hypocrite that he would be not unlikely to mislead even Buckingham who knew him so well. One old writer says: "Nor must I forget to let you know how perfect the king was in the art of dissimulation, or, to use his own phrase, king-craft": and tells of the last interview he had with the unfortunate and criminal Somerset. The king hung "about his neck, slabbering his cheeks . . . lolled about his neck" and sending a kiss to the equally guilty Countess, when he had already determined on their ruin; when the unhappy man left the room, he said: "I shall never see his face more."

The Commons were certainly informed that the king had blamed his relapse to Buckingham's medicaments; and full enquiry was made as to them. It turned out that they had been obtained—or at least some medicaments of the kind had been obtained—from a Dr. Remington of Dunmow in Essex, who had effected wonderful cures of "agues and such distempers with the same." One of the physicians who made a great to-do about the irregular medicines was obliged to flee the country on account of his allegations of poisoning by these medicines, Dr. Eglisham, left a book in which he says that "Sir Matthew Lister and he being the week after the king's death at the Earl of Warwick's house in Essex, they sent for Dr. Remington . . . who . . . said That one Baker, a servant of the Duke's, came to him in his master's name and desired him if he had any certain specific against an ague, to send it him, and accordingly he sent him mithridate spread upon leather." "But," the account continues, "Sir Matthew and I showing him a piece of the Plaster we had kept after it was taken off, he seemed greatly surprised and offered to take his corporal oath that it was none of what he had given Baker, nor did he know what kind of a mixture it was." Of these doctors, Eglisham and Lister are known to the biographers. Eglisham was a Scottish medical man of some repute, apparently of Leyden training, who was appointed Royal Physician to King James in 1616 and remained such till the king's death: after the death of the king, he had no hesitation in accusing Buckingham of poisoning him: he had to flee the country but he continued his accusations, and at length in 1626, he published his "Prodromus Vindictae," containing the charge; this is the work from which I have quoted. It is generally thought that professional jealousy had something to do with the charge, and his testimony has not received much credit; but to say that the charge was absurd is to ignore the nature of Buckingham. Sir Matthew Lister was an Oriel man, an M. D. of Basle, and physician to Queen Anne, wife of King James and later to King Charles I. I do not find that he corroborated Dr. Eglisham although he lived until 1656, thirty years after the publication of the *Prodromus Vindictae*. The mithridate which was supposed to have been spread on leather as a plaster for the king, was a well-known medicament, originally discovered and used by Mithridates, King of Pontus and Bithynia and much favored as an alexipharmic: it has long gone out of vogue.

It seems reasonably clear that none of the usual poisons was used, at all events; they were well-known: we find that Franklin, who was applied to by Mrs. Turner, who would now be called a

"Beauty-specialist," but in her own day was rather a witch, for the strongest poisons wherewith to poison Sir Thomas Overbury and get him out of the way of Somerset and his equally villainous Countess, saying that he "bought seven, viz., aquafortis, white arsenic, mercury, powder of diamonds, lapis costitus, great spiders and cantharides." Aquafortis, is, of course, impure nitric acid (HNO_3): white arsenic, our ordinary arsenic: mercury is mercury sublimate, mercury bichloride: lapis costitus is a layman's misprint for lapis causticus, potassa cum calce, potassa fusa, potassa caustica of the Pharmacopoeias: spiders were once supposed to be poisonous, although old Dioscorides who knew everything said that softened and made into a plaster, and applied to the forehead and temples, they prevented ague—and I am prepared to prove that they were as efficacious, so applied, as nine-tenths of the medicines recommended by Dioscorides or any other writer before the 19th century.

Whatever the fact may have been, it is certain that within a very short time of the king's death, as appears by contemporary letters—"some Scotch doctors mutter at a plaister the Countess of Buckingham applied at the outside of his stomach."

The Duke made his defence which was brought down to the Commons, June 10: King Charles dismissed Parliament, June 15, most abruptly, and the Impeachment came to an end: a sham Information was preferred by the king's command in the Star Chamber, charging the same alleged offenses; the Duke put in his Answer and some witnesses were examined, "But the Cause came not to a judicial hearing in the Court."

A new Parliament was called for March, 1628: the Commons took up Buckingham's case at once; on June 12th, they presented a Remonstrance to the King, and on June 26th, Parliament was prorogued: on August 23rd, Felton removed the Duke beyond any further prosecution by the Commons and sent him before the final Judge.

What was the truth of the matter? It is notorious that many did not hesitate to charge King Charles with being at least an accessory after the fact to his father's removal, and to say that the favor in which the Duke was held by the new king was due to the fact that he had made him king: our modern thought of fair play revolts from the proposition. but not only "Scotch doctors," but many others could not be persuaded out of the horrible idea. It may have had its part in bringing about the tragedy of 1649; but in the result we must say "Not Proven."

There was certainly a strong current of feeling against the Duke after the king's death; several pamphlets still extant were widely circulated with the charges made bluntly. It may suffice to refer to one of these, preserved in the Harleian Miscellany, vol. v., pp. 211, sq.—intituled: "*Strange Apparitions, or The Ghost of King James,*" 4 to., London, 1642. This purports to be a dialogue by the ghost of Buckingham with the ghost of King James, which brought with it the ghost of Dr. George Eglisham: and later the ghost of Marquis Hamilton appears. The latter charges him with "two eminent murders, namely, of the King's Majesty and of me, the Lord Marquis of Hamilton"; and Eglisham says: "As I did once accuse thee unto the King and parliament, and the whole world, so I affirm again, that thou didst poison King James and the Marquis of Hamilton; and first I will prove the murder of the Marquis of Hamilton, who died first." He does not stop at these murders but goes on to say: "And, lastly, for fear that I, George Eglisham, should discover you as I have now done, to be the poisoner, I was sought to be murdered, but I fled to Holland; and there, by your appointment, I was stabbed and Killed." Buckingham is stricken and goes to "weep for grief"—in numbers, be it said, as everyone seems to have done in those days, from Shakespeare down or up.

"Murder will out, and just revenge, though slow,
Doth overtake the murderer, this I know

* * * * *

For before Felton did my life conclude,
I added murder to ingratitude

* * * * *

But I was most ungrateful to my king,
And Marquis Hamilton, whom I bring
Both to untimely deaths; forgive my sin.
Great king, great marquis, doctor Eglisham,
All murder'd by the Duke of Buckingham."

After that one need not be astonished to learn that

"This being said, the duke's ghost shrunk away."

It may be added that the biographers have not been able to learn the time, place or manner of the Doctor's death; but, of course, they did not consult Buckingham's ghost—it is rather suggested that he made his living in his latter years by counterfeiting the coin of the Realm, but that may be another of the slanders with which his age teemed; *quien sabe?*