THE LIVES OF THE MOST EMINENT BRITISH PAINTERS AND SCULPTORS. IN FIVE VOLUMES. VOL. IV

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ALLAN CUNNINGHAM

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OF

THE FOURTH VOLUME.

LIVES

OF

EMINENT PAINTERS.

JAMESONE.

George Jamesone, called by Walpole the Vandyke of Scotland, a Presbyterian, and, if tradition may be trusted, a poet, was the son of Andrew Jamesone, architect, and born at Aberdeen in the year 1586, on the day in which his native queen was beheaded by her implacable cousin at Fotheringay. Neither the times in which he was born, nor the religion in which he had been educated, were favourable to elegant tastes, yet a strong love of art came upon him; though at what age, or in what manner, no one has related. That it came early, we may conjecture from the proficiency which he attained; and that the stimulus proceeded from the profession of his father, then more closely connected with the sister arts than now, can hardly be doubted, since we find no trace of any contemporary school or professor of art in his native place. But yesterday a reformation in religion, above all others fierce and desolating, had cast the magnificent abbeys and monasteries of Scotland to the ground, and destroyed their images and paintings, as things idolatrous; good examples in any of the fine arts must therefore have been scarce, and the aspiring student

must have found himself surrounded with difficulties such as true genius alone could surmount. Amid all the facilities which modern galleries and academies afford, the progress of the most gifted is slow and painful,—what must have been his case who had few examples and no instructers?

However he came by it, Jamesone acquired such skill in painting as attracted the notice of his countrymen: he was advised to seek abroad what he could not find at home; and had the good sense or the good fortune to establish himself in the studio of Rubens, with whom he remained for several years in the company of Vandyke. We know that in the year 1619 Vandyke left his great master and went into Italy; and the inscription on a picture by Jamesone informs us, that in 1623 he was a husband and a father, and pursuing his profession in Scotland. It is therefore probable that the latter was some thirty years old before he visited the Netherlands,—a ripe age; yet students of threescore years and more are not unknown to academies. I have seen William Blake, within a few years of his death, studying at Somerset House with all the ardour of youth; and other names not less distinguished might be cited.

Many may be inclined to wonder that any such being as a painter should have existed in Scotland during the stormy days of the Covenant, much more that he should have flourished, become famous, and acquired a fortune; but the truth is, that the fierce discipline of Knox was soon softened, and that in matters of taste and elegance the Presbyterians of the North were by no means so furious and uncompromising as the Puritans and Independents of the South. Even during the half century that followed the first dawn of the Scottish Reformation, plays were allowed to be enacted, and none of the flock were forbidden to attend such exhibitions, save elders and deacons. In short, the sour austerity so

much satirised by poets and ridiculed by historians, did not descend in full force till the period of the great civil war. The love of poetry, and painting, and architecture, spread from King James among his nobles north and south; and his two gifted sons formed collections, and patronised genius, with all the liberality which a turbulent and economical House of Commons would allow. Jamesone, when he returned from foreign study, found painting a not unhonoured profession among the northern Presbyterians, and was employed to execute many portraits of distinguished Covenanters as well as Cavaliers.

It has been said, sarcastically, that in this, nationality overcame the aversion to a profane art, and that the natural love of all men for what is strange and first seen, was too strong for the discipline of the kirk; but foreign artists had formerly been employed to do what a native was able to perform now; and those who have acquainted themselves with the antiquities of the North, need not be told that works of art, rivalling at least those with which Catholic architecture had adorned itself in England, were largely diffused over Scotland, both mainland and isle. The church of Rome, the mother of much that is useful and elegant, had from early ages captivated the people by her carved processions of saints, and her painted miracles and legends. The kings, too, had not only patronised works of genius, but some of them excelled personally in poetry, music, and architecture; tapestry, representing passages from Scripture or from the poets, abounded; sculptured tombs in freestone or in marble were to be found in every church; and even the wildest of the Western Isles show, in the present day, such relics of old magnificence as excite the admiration of travellers. That the sculptures of the most splendid abbeys, and the paintings in the castles of the nobles, were altogether unworthy of being