

EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT.

CHARLESTON, August 10th, 1822.

SIR,

AFTER a prolonged and almost uninterrupted session of six weeks, the first Court organized for the trial of Slaves charged with an attempt to raise an Insurrection in this City, was dissolved on the 20th ult. Another Court was subsequently convened, and after a session of three days, closed the unpleasant investigation with which it was charged, and adjourned on the 8th instant, *sine die*.

During the interesting period occupied by the Court first organized, the public mind was agitated by a variety of rumours calculated to produce great excitement and alarm. These had their origin in the nature of the transaction, and the secrecy and seclusion observed in the incipient stages of inquiry; as but few of the circumstances were known to the community, and the number apprehended and sentenced to the severest punishment, beyond any former example. Certainty gave place to exaggeration, and the general impression sustained the rumour of a very extensive conspiracy.

The effects resulting from these reports, if uncontrolled by an exhibition of the facts, are too obvious to require comment. The reputation of the State must suffer abroad, and a rapid deterioration of property occur within; while suspicion and anxiety will continue long to mar the public tranquillity. It becomes, therefore, a duty imperiously obligatory on me, to represent the occurrences as they have transpired, and thus evidence to you, that the attempt has not only been greatly magnified, but as soon as discovered, it ceased to be dangerous.

A servant prompted by attachment to his master, communicated to him, that he had been requested to give his assent and subscribe his name to a list of persons already engaged in the conspiracy. The Intendant immediately received the information, and caused the arrest of three slaves of Mr. Paul: one of whom was subsequently identified by the servant making the communication. The City Council was convened, and after a very close and attentive examination, a general impression was produced, that but little credence could attach to the statement. A prudent caution was nevertheless exercised, and the fellow charged committed to solitary imprisonment. A few days after his confinement, he made many disclosures to a member of Council, but so amplified the circumstances, that the utmost credulity was requisite to the belief of his tale.

Some consternation was obviously produced amongst a few of the conspirators by the arrest of these slaves, and I cannot doubt led to a detail more plausible and deserving of attention. Another servant, whose name is also concealed from prudential motives stated generally, that such a combination actually existed and mentioned the names of several who were most conspicuous in their exertions, adding with great confidence, that the explosion of their schemes would occur on the ensuing Sunday Night. This confession was given on Thursday the 13th June, and contained the recital of several occurrences which would precede the attempt and evidence the intention. This suggested the propriety, while it sanctioned the effort to conceal from the community the intelligence thus received for the intervening time; during which, extensive and efficient preparations were made for the safety and protection of the City. Saturday night and Sunday morning passed without the predicted demonstrations: doubts were again excited, and counter orders issued diminishing the guard. The facts communicated were generally known to our fellow citizens on Sunday; producing a night of sleepless anxiety. But no one of the predicted (or any other) occurrences, presented itself to disturb the general tranquillity.

On the 18th June, ten slaves were arrested, and on the 19th, the Court was organized for their trial. Investigation was retarded by the difficulty of procuring authentic evidence, and it was not until the 28th that the sentence of death was pronounced against six of the persons charged with the offence. Denmark Vesey, a free negro, was arrested on the 21st, and on the 22d put on his trial. Although he was unquestionably the instigator and chief of this plot, no positive proof of his guilt appeared until the 25th. This grew out of the confession of one of the convicts, and on the 27th, his guilt was further established by a servant of Mr. Ferguson.

The progress made, and the expectations of immunity from punishment by confession, gradually developed the plot, and produced the arrest of several others, fortunately two who were principals, Monday Gell and Gullah Jack. These with three others, John Horry, Charles Drayton, and Harry Haig were convicted, and sentenced to die on Friday the 12th July last; but at the suggestion of the Court, that important communications were expected from them, Monday Gell, Charles Drayton, and Harry Haig were respited.

The arrest of Perault a servant of Mr. Strohecker, which took place the day previous to the respite and the general and very important discoveries made by him, enabled the Committee of Vigilance, not only to elicit the confirmation of his statement from the three convicts, but to apprehend a great number of persons engaged in the plot. Among others, William Garner, reputed to be one of the principals, the only one not then apprehended.

The number of persons at this period under arrest evinced the necessity of such arrangements of the testimony, as would enable the Court to progress with more rapidity. This duty devolved on the Committee of Vigilance: and principally from the general information of Perault, and of the convicts Monday Gell and Charles Drayton, facility was given to the further proceedings of the Court. In the short space of seven days, thirty-two Negroes were convicted; twenty-two of whom were executed on Friday the 20th July; and within four days after, eleven others were convicted, four of whom have also been executed.

Having established the existence of a plot and the places of rendezvous, all that was deemed requisite for conviction, was to prove an association with the Ringleaders, and an expression of their assent to the measure. On such, generally, the sentence of death has been executed. Others, who without actually combining, were proved to have known of the conspiracy, and to have given their sanction by any act, have been sentenced to die, and their punishment commuted to banishment from the United States; or sentenced in the first instance to banishment from this State, or from the United States. In this manner the whole number, seventy-two, have been disposed of; thirty-five executed and thirty-seven sentenced to banishment. With these we may reasonably conclude, that we have reached the extremities of this conspiracy, and this opinion, if not conclusive, is entitled to great weight, when we advert to the extraordinary measures pursued, to effect the object and the motives which influenced the accused.

No means which experience or ingenuity could devise were left unessayed, to eviscerate the plot. In the labours of investigation, the Court was preceded by a Committee formed by the City Council, whose intelligence, activity and zeal were well adapted to the arduous duties of their appointment. Their assiduity, aided by the various sentiments which influenced the prisoners, produced a rapid developement of the plot. Several of the conspirators had entered into solemn pledges, to partake of a common destiny, and one at least was found, who after his arrest, felt no repugnance to enforce the obligation, by surrendering the names of his associates. A spirit of retaliation and revenge produced a similar effect with others, who suspected that they were the victims of treachery; and this principle operated with full effect, as the hope or expectation of pardon predominated. To the last hour of the existence of several, who appeared to be conspicuous actors in this drama, they were pressingly importuned to make further confessions.

Among the conspirators the most daring and active, was Monday, the slave of Mr. Gell. He could read and write with facility, and thus attained an extraordinary and dangerous influence over his fellows. Permitted by his owner to occupy a house in a central part of the city, hourly opportunities were afforded for the exercise of his skill, on those, who were attracted to his shop by business or favour. It was there that his artful and insidious delusions were kept in perpetual exercise. Materials were abundantly furnished in the seditious pamphlets brought into this state, by equally culpable incendiaries; while the speeches of the oppositionists in congress to the admission of Missouri, gave a serious and imposing effect to his machinations. This man wrote to Boyer (by his own confession) requesting his aid, and addressed the envelope of his letter to a relative of the person, who became the bearer of it, a negro from one of the Northern States.— He was the only person proved to have kept a list of those engaged; and the Court considered his confession full and ample. From such means and such sources of information, it cannot be doubted that all who were actually concerned, have been brought to justice. There is no exception within my knowledge; it has, however, been stated, that a plantation in St. John's was infected, but I do not know on what authority.

This plain detail of the principal incidents in this transaction will satisfy you, that the scheme has not been general nor alarmingly extensive. And it furnishes a cause for much satisfaction, that although religion, superstition, fear and almost every passion that sways the human mind, have been artfully used by the wicked instigators of this design, so few have been seduced from a course of propriety and obedience. Those who associated were unprovided with the means of attack or resistance. No weapons (if we except thirteen hoop-poles) have been discovered; nor any testimony received but of six pikes, that such preparations were actually made. The witnesses generally agree in one fact, that the attempt was to have taken place on Sunday night the 16th June, differing a little as to the precise time; 12 o'clock appears to have been the hour.

From the various conflicting statements made during the trials, it is difficult to form a plausible conjecture of their ultimate plans of operation; no two agreeing on general definite principles. That the first essay would be made with clubs against the State Arsenal is inferrible, from their being unprovided with arms, and the concurrence of several witnesses. But whether the attack would be made simultaneously by various detachments, or whether the whole, embodied at a particular spot would proceed to the accomplishment of their object, is very uncertain. Upon the whole it is manifest, that if any plan had been organized, it was never communicated by the principal conspirator to the leaders or the men, as they were wholly ignorant even of the places of rendezvous; although within two days of the time appointed, and but one man arrested prior to the day fixed on for the attempt.

When we contrast the numbers engaged with the magnitude of the enterprize, the imputation of egregious folly or madness is irresistible: and supposing the attempt to have been predicated on the probability, that partial success would augment their numbers, the utmost presumption would scarcely have hazarded the result. Servility long continued debases the mind and abstracts it from that energy of character, which is fitted to great exploits. It cannot be supposed, therefore, without a violation of the immutable laws of nature, that a transition from slavery and degradation to authority and power, could instantly occur. Great and general excitement may produce extensive and alarming effects; but the various passions which operate with powerful effect on this class of persons, impart a confident assurance of detection and defeat to every similar design. While the event is remote, they may listen with credulity to the artful tale of the instigator, and concur in its plausibility; but the approach of danger will invariably produce treachery, the concomitant of dastardly dispositions. In the fidelity and attachment of a numerous class of these persons, we have other sources of security and early information; from both of which it is reasonable to conclude, that in proportion to the number engaged, will be the certainty of detection; and that an extensive conspiracy cannot be matured in this State.

I have entered with much reluctance on this detail, nor would it have been considered requisite, but to counteract the number of gross and idle reports, actively and extensively circulated, and producing general anxiety and alarm. And, although, their authors may have no evil design, and may really be under the delusion, it is easy to perceive what pernicious consequences may ensue from not applying the proper corrective. Every individual in the State is interested, whether in relation to his own property, or the reputation of the State, in giving no more importance to the transaction than it justly merits. The Legislature have wisely provided the means of efficient protection. If the citizens will faithfully perform the duty enjoined on them by the Patrol Laws, I fear not that we shall continue in the enjoyment of as much tranquillity and safety, as any State in the Union.

I have the honor to be,

Very respectfully, Sir,

Your obedient servant.