

READINGS IN IRISH HISTORY

By "SHANACHIE."

THE CHARACTER OF HENRY II.

"Thou hast done well, perhaps,
To lift the bright disguise,
And lay the bitter truth
Before our shrinking eyes;
When evil crawls below
What seems so pure and fair,
Thine eyes are keen and true
To find the serpent there.
And yet—I turn away;
Thy task is not divine—
The evil angels look
On earth with eyes like thine."

—Adelaide Proctor.

There is something revolting in digging up and gibbeting men long since dead and buried. If, however, the evil that men do did not too often live after them, there would but few be found anxious to devote attention to such mechanoholy business. Now the mortal remains of Henry II. "to no such aureate dust are turned as buried once men want dug up again." The narrator of Ireland's story accordingly might well let him rest, if the deeds and frauds done in the days of his flesh were not still remembered: if a long seven hundred years had been able to wipe out, or even diminish, the calumnies, the duplicity, the bitter strife which the Anglo-Norman invasion engendered. Charity to many calls for justice upon one.

It is asserted, and denied, that Pope Adrian IV. entrusted Henry with the important duty of restoring order in Church and State in Ireland. It will be interesting, then, to take a glance at the character of the man chosen, it is said, for so delicate and sacred a mission. "There was something in his build and look, the square stout frame, the fiery face, the close-cropped hair, the prominent eyes, the bull neck, the coarse, strong hands, the bowed legs, that marked out the keen, stirring, coarse-fibred man of business. 'He never sits down,' said one who observed him closely: 'he is always on his legs from morning till night.' Orderly in business, careless in appearance, sparing in diet, never resting or giving his servants rest, chatty, inquisitive, endowed with a singular charm of address and strength of memory, obstinate in love or hatred, a fair scholar, a great hunter: his general air that of a rough, passionate, busy man, Henry's personal character told directly on the character of his reign." Henry II. has been called a Henry VIII. born before his time, and as such he has had many admirers and apologists. He never cut himself off from the Church, and hence even Catholic writers have been deceived by his nominal Catholicity. We must bear in mind that in those days heresy and schism were unpolitic and dangerous tastes even in kings, some of whom would have done less harm to the Church if they had thrown off the mask of Catholicity and come out in their true character as heretics. "Religion grew more and more identified with patriotism under the eyes of a king who whispered, and scribbled, and looked at picture-books during Mass, who never confessed, and cursed God in wild frenzies of blasphemy."

In 1152, a few years before he is said to have received the grant of Ireland from the Pope, Henry, then Duke of Normandy, had married Eleanor of Aquitaine, who brought to him as her dowry seven of the richest provinces of France. The previous marriage of Eleanor with Louis VII., King of France, had been declared null by the French bishops without reference to the Holy See; but such was her shameless profligacy, that the French King was glad to get rid of her even at the loss of the best part of his kingdom. Six weeks after the separation, Henry, then only nineteen years of age, married the outcast Queen, having been, as it was said, in collusion with her, and directing

her in the affair of separation. As a Church reformer, Henry II. would seem to have been a bad selection. Cardinal Vivian, the Roman Legate, after a long interview with him said: "Never did I witness this man's equal in lying"; while the King of France declared to Henry's ambassadors that "their master was so full of fraud and deceit that it was impossible to keep faith with him." (Lingard.) His own son Richard once said to his advisers, that in his family the custom was for the son to hate the father—that the whole family had come from the devil, and to the devil they should return. "He could," say Giraldus, "scarcely spare an hour to hear Mass, and then he was more occupied in counsels and conversation about affairs of State than in his devotions." He adds that he seized on the revenues of the Church and gave the money to his soldiers. "Do you pretend not to be aware," writes Thomas à Beckett to the cardinals at Rome, "that the King of England has already usurped, and day by day continuess to usurp the possessions of the Church: while he overthrows her liberties, he has stretched forth his hand against the Lord's anointed: everywhere, and without exception, he has assailed ecclesiastics. Some he has put in prison, others he has slain, or torn out their eyes, or forced to fight in single combat, or to pass through the ordeal of fire and water."

If it be objected that this is a picture of Henry towards the middle of his reign, not of him at the time he is said to have applied for and received the papal permission to invade Ireland, we may reply that even before his accession to the English throne there were misgivings and suspicions as to his character. St. Thomas à Beckett, replying to his opponents who asserted that what Henry did against the liberties of the Church was inspired by a mere personal hatred of the Archbishop, asks: "Was I Archbishop when Gregory, Cardinal Deacon of St. Angelo, foreseeing the tyranny of this man, persuaded the Lord Eugenius to forbid the coronation of Eustace, the son of King Stephen, saying that it was easier to hold a ram by the horns than a lion by the tail?"

The last years of Henry's reign were embittered by the revolt of his sons, instigated by their mother, to whom Henry had proved an unfaithful husband. In 1189, Richard, now his father's heir, intrigued with Philip of France to drive Henry from his kingdom. The plot broke out into actual conflict, and their allied forces suddenly appeared before Le Mans, from which Henry was driven in headlong flight towards Normandy. "From a height where he halted to look back on the burning city, so dear to him as his birthplace, the King hurled his curse against God: 'Since Thou hast taken from me the town I loved best, where I was born and bred, and where my father lies buried, I will have my revenge on Thee too—I will rob Thee of that thing which Thou lovest most in me.' Death was upon him, and the longing of a dying man drew him to the home of his race, but Tours fell as he lay at Saumur, and the hunted King was driven to beg mercy from his foes. They gave him the list of the conspirators against him: at the head of them was his youngest and best-loved son, John. 'Now,' he said, as he turned his face to the wall, 'let things go as they will—I care no more for myself or for the world.' He was borne to Chinon by the silvery waters of Vienne, and muttering, 'Shame, shame on a conquered King,' passed sullenly away." (Green, *History of English People*, p. 112.)

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