

The Fate of Sacrilege

(By M^r. CANON BARRY, D.D., in the London *Catholic Times*.)

It sometimes happens in one's reading that a single sentence strikes home as if it were inscribed on a monument for everlasting remembrance. Such an effect I felt lately while turning over some pages written by an American tourist, Mr. R. A. Cram, on *The Ruined Abbeys of Great Britain*. Those were the words that impressed me so strongly (p. 248): "In 1846, of the six hundred and thirty families to which monastic estates had been granted, only fourteen had not been extinguished through failure of male issue." What a fact—a world of facts—to muse upon! Did it reveal a divine judgment, or was it mere coincidence? "Since then (i.e., 1846)," adds the author, "several more have come to an end; and it is certainly notable that shame, disgrace, violent deaths, and total extinction have followed the names of all those who took part in the Suppression, from the House of Tudor down to the lay holders of the stolen estates." The doom which seems thus to be associated with despoiling the sanctuary was well established in popular belief, and even at Court the shadow of it fell. "Church land," wrote Archbishop Whitgift to his patroness, Queen Elizabeth, "added to an ancient inheritance hath proved like a moth fretting a garment, and secretly consumed both; or like the eagle that stole a coal from the altar, and thereby set her nest on fire, which consumed both her young eagles and herself."

Sir Henry Spelman.

Bold language this from a creature of her own appointment, addressed to Henry VIII's daughter, but evidence of the terror which clung to the crime of sacrilege in a once Catholic nation. Until several generations had passed away the feeling or the fear lingered, witnessed Sir Henry Spelman's famous book, *The History and Fate of Sacrilege*, written perhaps in 1632, but published in 1698, more than 57 years after the author's death. I read it with some disappointment, for it is by no means a work of genius. But Spelman acted up to his belief, and surrendered the Church property that he had purchased, as well as prevailing on friends to do in like manner. Sceptics may, of course, point to Woburn Abbey and the Russells, who waxed mighty on Church-spoils and are by no means extinct. But no conclusion need be drawn from such prosperity. The lesson of certain tragedies makes itself plain and formidable, although many a culprit escapes. Take in illustration the record of the Shrewsbury peerage and the Catholic Talbots. Here was a determined effort to make reparation for holding lands consecrated to Religion: and clergy and faithful knew the object as well as the generous Earl himself knew it, whose benefactions were on so generous a scale. All, however, was in vain. Thrice already since 1718 had a nephew succeeded an uncle. Then the title passed to a cousin, who died unmarried in 1836; and with him the Catholic line expired. Now my point is that the Earl (a convert), who founded churches and was profuse in charities, hoped thereby to secure a remis-

sion of the judgment which would not suffer a direct succession to his title; that this was well known; and that Catholics, though sorry, were not surprised when the honors passed to a distant line.

The "Curse of Cowdray."

Still more celebrated is the "Curse of Cowdray," which I have dealt with at length in the *Dublin Review* of January, 1886. It goes far back, even to the dissolution of the monasteries and the grant made by Henry VIII to his Master of the Horse, Sir Anthony Browne, K.G., of Battle Abbey, as likewise to the convent of Easebourne, St. Mary's Overy, Southwark, and much other consecrated property. Sir Anthony pulled down Battle Abbey, the church as well as the monastery, and took up his residence in the Abbot's own house. The legend asserts that either at Battle or at Easebourne, a monk or a nun pronounced this judgment: "By fire and water thy line shall come to an end, and it shall perish out of the land." History tells us that Sir Anthony Browne's representative, the seventh Viscount Montague, who succeeded to this title and Cowdray in 1767, married a Protestant wife and conformed to the Church of England, but repented on his death-bed. However, his son, the eighth Viscount, was brought up an Anglican, turned out to be an unruly young fellow, went on the foreign tour, and in the autumn of 1793 resolved with a companion to "shoot" the Fall of the Rhine near Schaffhausen. Both were drowned; and an eye-witness lived until 1867 to tell the tale. Moreover, on September 24, 1793, Cowdray itself was burnt to the ground. Thus in one year the double curse of fire and water saw fulfilment, perhaps even on the same day.

But that was not all. The unlucky Viscount had left Cowdray to his only sister, Elizabeth Mary Browne, who married William S. Poyntz, of Midgham, about a year after the tragic event of Schaffhausen. Two boys were born to them; and in July, 1815, these lads met their death by drowning in the sea off Bognor before their mother's eyes. The title of Montague expired with Mark Anthony Browne, a Benedictine monk, cousin of the eighth Viscount. Cowdray House remained a ruin; and the estate, after becoming the property of Lord Egmont, now gives a title in the House of Lords to a modern millionaire. The most direct descendants of Sir Anthony Browne are all Catholics, and some are priests; but they hold no Church property.

Sin and Its Consequences.

What is to be said of a story like this? Whether any words of doom were spoken at Easebourne or Battle we do not know; but the facts are undeniable, and so is the guilt of sacrilege they involve. No wonder, then, if devout minds trace the law of retribution working until it has avenged the crime committed in that frightful orgy of avarice, ruin, and murder, which pulled down English monasticism even to the ground. Here, then, I cannot resist the

wave of suspicion that has had its influence in every nation where such crimes have taken place. Will not the old mysterious connection between sin and woe, impiety and misfortune, according to the fixed laws of Eternal Justice, have been as surely vindicated in the chronicles of Shrewsbury and Cowdray as in the tragic dramas of Æschylus? Listen a second time to our American observer: "In 1846, of the 630 families to which monastic estates had been granted, only 14 had not been extinguished through failure of male issue." Allow that "punishment is the other half of crime," and you will be tempted to concede the fitness of a penalty which ends the glory of the name thus dishonored by sharing in the royal plunder. Accident, or the law of averages, may be invoked; yet we feel tempted to murmur with the Athenian poet, "which of these terrible things came to pass by chance?" Evil works for evil; and here the root and the fruit are equally visible. To connect them is natural; men have always done so. And the desolation of Cowdray since its burning was a memorial which said plainly, "Be ye warned; do right, and learn that God is not mocked."

"Henry the Scourge of England."

We are apt to look upon Henry VIII's suppression of the monasteries in the light of an episode, whereas no greater Revolution ever occurred in England since the Norman Conquest. Two writers, conscientious but very unlike, have made this clear—I mean William Cobbett and Cardinal Gasquet. Cobbett's *History of the Protestant Reformation* is among the wittiest, the most laughter-stirring, of English political pamphlets, accurate in all matters of consequence, and irresistibly convincing where it shows that when the monasteries and other charitable institutions fell, the people lost an inheritance worth many millions of our money. Cardinal Gasquet sums up the immediate losses to education, works of charity, and in general to civilisation, resulting in the emergence of our modern proletariat by direct creation. The land was covered with ruins; the universities became almost empty; a new Poor Law made slaves of mendicants, while the Court squandered what had been given to the sanctuary. No more heinous crime against God and man was ever committed in this England, which even to-day suffers from it. Monasticism, indeed, though cut down to the ground, has risen up again, flourishing within sight almost of Glasbury Tor, and covering the land with its promise of revival. During a full thousand years it had been chiefly instrumental in securing to mankind the blessings of Christianity and culture. When its last hour struck in England it was neither deeply corrupt, nor unfaithful to its public obligations. Its final act was to give glorious martyrs, Carthusians, Brigettine, in defence of God's law, while the nation, cowed and silent, but in their hearts admiring, looked on. The House of Tudor died out; Cromwell and Cranmer perished, leaving behind them evil memories, after suffering as they had made their victims suffer. But the end is not yet. We can only say that Luther, Knox, and Cranmer belong to a bad past; while St. Benedict and St. Francis have won universal homage.

Alf. Driscoll

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