

OPENING OF THE NEW LAW COURTS OF ENGLAND.

sance, that exquisite work of the great days of Elizabeth, the only remaining building where a play of Shakespeare's was presented to the Queen, the Court, and his contemporaries, that matchless relic is the hall of an Inn of Court. Three hundred and ten years have mellowed the glow of its blazoned windows, and the quaint fancy of its oaken screen, the fretted beams of its roof, and the faces of the kings and sages of the law in the paintings on its walls. A man who is neither a herald nor an æsthete may permit himself a weak corner in his interests for that long roll of lawyers whose arms and portraits people the four Inns of Court. There is no collection of portraits with so high a standard of power, dignity, acuteness, and patience. And the ermine and scarlet of the judges is, perhaps, the one living bit of noble mediæval costume which has survived the storm of modern innovation.

It was no lawyer, but a poet and the friend of Shakespeare, who called the Inns of Court "the noblest nurseries of humanity and liberty in the kingdom;" and if this were poetic exaggeration of rare old Ben, it remains most true, that the part they have played in literature and politics is hardly less than their part in law. Strike out of English poetry and prose, out of drama, fiction and essay, strike out of the history of our Parliament and of our Government, all members of the Inns and the associations of the Inns, and the blank would be serious indeed. A library would hardly tell the tale of those who flourished, and of all that was done within these precincts of the law. Scores of streets and alleys occupied the site of the present Courts of Justice, and the annals of each single street, and sometimes of a single house, would almost fill a volume. In spite of jests and quarrels, the public has ever taken kindly to the law, and yet more kindly to the lawyers; from Shakespeare to Goldsmith, from Bacon down to Thackeray and Dickens, our literature is saturated with the local colouring of Gray's Inn and the Temple, and of the communities out of which have issued so many of our statesmen, philosophers, teachers and poets.

And the public instinct is true when it feels that the societies of the law and the institutions of justice, which have in the past a history so rich and great, are about to begin a new life under new and ampler conditions. Vast as the

antiquity of English law has now become, it has not yet reached the thirteen centuries of Roman law proper; and the era of Justinian, which seemed at the time to be the end of that unparalleled growth, was itself, we can see now, but the beginning of another epoch of thirteen centuries, wherein the Roman law has since, with its rival the English, completely encircled the civilized world. There is untold work yet before the English lawyer; whole mountains of obstruction and obsolete matter to level; areas of consolidation to clear, compared to which the task of Trebonian was an everyday thing. But the Roman law had lasted for near a thousand years, it had outlived even all that in government was free, and all that in philosophy and literature was brilliant, and it was still in the maturity of its career, rent by anomalies as deep as any in our law to-day, as deeply encumbered with antique forms, as much laden with the masses of its own learning, and as far as we are now from its own ideal of symmetry and elegance. And in spite of its thousand years of life, it had youth and strength enough to spare to complete its task to the end, so that, in the issue, the last years of its mighty career in the old world were the grandest of all; and the work of Justinian has impressed the imagination of mankind more than the work of all preceding legislators or jurists. Few will think that the civilized world and the rising Christianity of the early Middle Ages would ever have perfectly absorbed the Roman law, if they ever had it offered them in its primitive instead of in its final form.

The English law has had a career not wholly unlike the Roman. It has cast out its archaisms; it has built up its equity into a vast but elastic fabric; it has recast its judicial organization, its procedure, its formulas; it has at length fused its law and equity, and has abolished the conflict of its own technicalities and fictions. It at last has a judicial machinery in full harmony with the times and their practical needs. But it retains some structural anomalies of really special importance; it has little that can be called symmetry; and it almost despairs of consolidation. The English law, in fact, is nearly in the same stage of its history that the Roman law was in the epoch of its maturity, but before the great consolidation of Justinian and his immediate predecessors. It is a laughable phrase