

THE STABILITY OF THE LAW.

self-respect; who, "in the midst of a cruel war, of which he did not see the beginning nor live to see the end, did more for the establishment of order and justice than any other prince has been known to do in the profoundest peace." Its execution bears dates two centuries before the Norman conquest. When one looks back across this gulf of a thousand years, it almost staggers human belief to credit the incident. Through what vicissitudes of human history has this document survived! What changes, revolutions, conquests, has it witnessed! What else has survived the wreck of time? Westminster Abbey is called venerable, but it is four hundred years younger than this document. While the contract is couched in a language which none but curious scholars are now conversant with, the judgment of re-entry is expressed in a national tongue thrice changed since Alfred. Human memory is racked to recall the succession of kingly houses which have ruled Great Britain—Plantagenet, York, Lancaster, Stuart, Hanover—forty monarchs since Alfred. In regard to many of these rulers history is engaged in conjecture;—was Richard really a cruel tyrant, or a courteous gentleman and good king; was Henry the Eighth a monster of jealousy or a considerate and fond husband; did Mary of Scots really write those damaging letters to Bothwell, and was she really a party to the murder of her husband;—how mythical these characters, and how doubtful the events of their times have already become! The parties to this instrument belonged to a barbarous, abject, cruel, and superstitious race—a few savages, struggling for existence against exterior enemies and internal dissension;—while the reversioner of to-day is of the richest, most enlightened, and most powerful people on earth; who rule the seas; whose language is spoken by forty millions of descendants in a world three thousand miles distant, and undiscovered until six centuries after Alfred; and whose councils and influence govern the world from the Hebrides to India, from Australia to California and the Gulf of St. Lawrence. This contract was entered into seven centuries before Shakspeare, the acknowledged king of universal literature, of whose achievements and very existence literary inquiry

is even now beginning to raise grave doubts. Since those parties contracted, all the greatest facts of human history have occurred. Chivalry has risen and fallen; the discovery of the art of printing has set thought free and banished superstition; the invention of gunpowder has revolutionized warfare; the discovery of the telescope has enabled men to read the heavens and lift themselves a little nearer the Infinite; the birth of classical learning has softened the hearts of men, and refined their tastes by "the newly-disseminated poetry of Virgil, the eloquence of Cicero, and the glowing narratives of Livy;" the reformation has given mankind the open Bible; the discovery of America has given liberty a home and asylum; and the abolition of American slavery has demonstrated that there is such a thing as a national conscience, and such a being as an overruling God. The race who enforce the contract are as much above the race to whom those belonged who made it, as it is possible for human thought to conceive, and yet the contract is respected and enforced as if it had been made only a generation ago.

We daresay this incident does not excite much attention in England. Naturally it would be more remarked in a country like ours, whose beginning was only yesterday. But really it is an occurrence that speaks volumes for the constancy and integrity of the Anglo-Saxon race, and for the stability of its laws. We venture to say that such an occurrence would be impossible, historically, legally, or morally, in any other country than Great Britain. The Anglo-Saxon race is the only race that uniformly keeps engagements and recognizes the true idea of law. And strangest of all, the law that governs this people and by virtue of which an agreement is enforced a thousand years after its execution, exists but in tradition, and is unwritten. Laws inscribed on stone and brass have not been potent enough to cause other nations to keep faith; but here is a nation whose rule of action is omnipotent although it exists but in the oral consent of the people. The codes of Alfred and Canute have passed away, but equity and utility, the great principles on which all enduring law must be founded, survive, and command our admiration and obedience. If the spirit of the great Sax-