

Becket spent a great deal of his time abroad, and only returned to England, it would seem, to force upon his king things which some foreign power like that of the pope thought good to decree. His war cry was "the liberty of the Church," which he understood to be freedom from the King of England. It would have been better if he had turned his attention to the gross immoralities of his clergy, who are said to have been guilty frequently of the worst of crimes. The king earnestly wished to change this for the better. In many ways he sought to reform the manners and customs of his people, and wished especially to cleanse the ranks of the clergy from scandalous actions. The law for clerical offenders was such that they could not be punished as laymen, but simply handed over to the monasteries for discipline. A clergyman might commit murder or any other crime, and only pay some ridiculous penance in punishment. In trying to remove this scandal, the king should have received the support of the archbishop; but instead of that he was met with defiant opposition. Becket sounded the cry of "the liberty of the Church," and through his influence the bishops refused the royal demands, whereupon the king swore a great oath that they, as well as others, should obey his laws. Becket had gone too far and was obliged to retract. The king summoned a council at the Castle of Clarendon, where the "Sixteen Constitutions of Clarendon" were drawn up and the archbishop, fearing the wrath of the king and the threatenings of his powerful barons, reluctantly signed them—only to be bitterly sorry for it afterwards. He felt that the world had triumphed over the Church, and therefore gave himself up to external penance which frightened terribly the ordinary beholder. Yet, the Constitutions of Clarendon were chiefly wholesome regulations for dealing with offending clerics.

The king felt that the pride and power of his contumacious archbishop must alike be broken, and, with the help of the Archbishop of York (ever ready to have a fling at Canterbury), the other bishops of England and his powerful barons, he stripped Becket of his money, and left him shorn of all power, so that he was obliged to steal away from England a fugitive disguised as a monk. After much suffering and many privations he reached France, where the king, Louis VII., received him kindly and even with the pomp due to him as Archbishop of Canterbury. But Becket retired to a monastery, where he remained for over two years, submitting to the hard, austere discipline in vogue in such institutions in those days—days when it was considered pious to be covered with dirt and vermin and to submit to severe bodily torture and pain.

In the meantime King Henry's terrible wrath was unappeased. He visited it upon all

the relations and friends of Becket and sent them forth penniless from the kingdom so that the archbishop might see the evil fruit of his policy.

But Thomas by no means as yet felt himself crushed. He aroused himself as if for battle. Leaving his monastery, he proceeded to a cathedral town of Burgundy and there issued a decree of excommunication against those bishops and barons who had assisted the King of England in robbing Canterbury of her lawful property.

The king was not included in the excommunication, yet he was not without his fears regarding it, though he showed it not. Though he declared that he "cared not an egg" for their excommunications, yet he knew very well that it would be a most uncomfortable thing for him to be under the ban of the Church.

He, therefore, began to listen to terms of reconciliation. Pope Alexander III. tried to bring these two fiery elements together in the bonds of peace. Four successive commissions endeavored to effect this and at times they seemed to have succeeded. The king and Becket met more than once, but only to part in anger, for the archbishop always made Henry feel that he held the honor of the Church far above his fealty to him as King of England. The king rode off in fierce anger.

But the fourth commission was more successful. Whether it was that Henry was weary of the contest, or that he began to see that he was injuring himself by it (for Becket had the pope and the people on his side—two great powers of the day), he suddenly yielded everything; and Becket, in a fit of generosity, threw himself at his monarch's feet, while the king, not to be outdone, dismounted and held the archbishop's stirrup while he regained the saddle from which he had thrown himself.

And the astonished commissioners looked on, surprised at their own success.

The way was now open for Thomas to return to his country and diocese, from which he had been absent for six years. Yet troubles awaited him. The bishops could not forget the excommunication he had hurled at them; nor did the king himself, after all, feel very much at rest, though much of his power he had now handed over to his son, who had been crowned by the Archbishop of York—an affront to Canterbury which Becket had not yet learned to forget.

His return to England was marked by a brilliant reception given to him by the people at Canterbury. But the barons were against him, and he had been warned more than once to beware of Norman daggers. Instead of trying to conciliate these fierce men, Becket ran counter to them. All who had assisted at the young king's coronation were to be considered excommunicated.

When the old king heard this at Bayeux,