

THE CATHOLIC LAYMAN.

Ḫóip do Dhia aḅ pna háipuib, aḅur ríodcáin aip an bealam beaḅeol do na dáoinib.

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SAVONAROLA.

WE are informed by travellers in Persia, that the following strange and remarkable phenomenon is occasionally beheld in those regions. Some time before day-break, the eastern horizon presents all the usual symptoms of the near approach of dawn. Faint streaks of light are seen in that part of the sky, which gradually increase in brilliancy, and the inexperienced traveller imagines that night is at an end, and that the day, whose arrival he has, perhaps, long wished for, is at length about to break. Soon, however, the light fades away, and is succeeded by a darkness like that of midnight, which seems the more intense from its contrast with the momentary splendour which preceded it. To this phenomenon is given the name of the false dawn.

It has often seemed to us that the foregoing circumstance furnishes no unsuitable emblem of the fate of those isolated reformers, of whom we occasionally read in history, who have lived *before their time*. When the world has long groaned under some system of tyranny and corruption, men of loftier spirits, full of warning and zeal, from time to time make their appearance, and raise their voice against the evils of the age. Such men, after diffusing a momentary light among their own contemporaries, have sometimes been suddenly removed by death at an early age, leaving behind them but little trace of their existence; and the minds of those who read the chequered narrative of their lives are impressed with a feeling of despondency and regret, that, owing to untoward circumstances, such great talents and energies have been lost to the world, which, under happier auspices, might have raised their possessors to a high place among the illustrious benefactors of mankind.

The remarkable individual whose name we have placed at the head of this article—Girolamo Savonarola—appears, from all that we know of his history, to have been a man such as we have just described. Had he lived about twenty years later than he did, we see much reason to believe that his ardent zeal for the cause of truth and holiness would have led him to co-operate with the great German reformer, Martin Luther, in the important work of the Reformation. But in the days of Savonarola, the minds of men, at least in Italy, were not yet ripe for such a change; and all the efforts which he made to produce an impression upon his countrymen, and to stir them up for a vigorous effort for Church reform, ended in disappointment, and brought Savonarola himself to a cruel and untimely end. Such men, however, do not live in vain. We feel convinced that no person whose own heart is animated by a sincere love of truth, can fail to leave *some* impression behind him. If he labours earnestly and diligently for the spiritual good of others, his exertions, sooner or later, will lead to salutary results, although not always, perhaps, in the way which we should expect. The motives of Savonarola have, indeed, been called in question, and his sincerity impugned, by various writers, both in ancient and modern times. We are far from asserting

that he was a faultless character, or that his conduct was in all respects worthy of imitation, but we fully believe him to have been sincere in his labours for the good of his countrymen; and, as the events of his chequered career were so strange and tragical, we trust the following brief account of them will not prove unacceptable to our readers.

Girolamo Savonarola was born at Ferrara, in the year 1452, and was admitted a friar of the Dominican order, at Bologna, when he was of the age of twenty-two. His Superiors at first employed him to teach metaphysics and natural philosophy; but at length he grew weary of this avocation, and applied himself entirely to the reading of pious books, and especially the Holy Scriptures. In the year 1489, he removed to Florence, where he soon acquired great fame as a powerful and convincing preacher. Florence at that time was governed by Lorenzo de' Medici, the father of Pope Leo X.; and the dissolute morals of both court and people, and their utter disregard for religion, must have awakened no ordinary feelings in the breast of a zealous and ardent man like Savonarola.

It would be impossible, consistently with our usual limits, to give our readers any idea of the lamentable state of morals and religion in Italy during the latter half of the fifteenth century. We will content ourselves with citing the unimpeachable testimony of Cardinal Bellarmine. "Some years before the rise of the Lutheran and Calvinistic heresy, according to the testimony of those who were then alive, there was an almost entire abandonment of equity in the ecclesiastical judgments; in morals, no discipline; in sacred literature, no erudition; in divine things, no reverence; religion was almost extinct.*" However the advocates of the Papal cause may endeavour to excuse and palliate this fearful state of things, the fact itself remains on record, that vice and irreligion rose to an unprecedented height at a time when the Pope and clergy of the Church of Rome had uncontrolled sway; and that, so far from checking those things, they themselves set an example of every kind of enormity. In a recent number of the able Roman Catholic periodical, the "Dublin Review," the writer of an eloquent article on the life of Savonarola makes the following remarkable statement on this subject:—

"The time in which he (Savonarola) lived, was such as to task the strongest intellect and the firmest will; well might he strive to look forward to the future for light, when the present closed so dark around. Well might he turn to read and expound with ardent longing the prophecies which told of the Church's never-failing life and perpetual renovation, when he saw so many of her ministers around him, sunk in vice, and simony enthroned on the chair of Peter.†"

The two Pontiffs who occupied the Papal chair in the time of Savonarola, and one of whom is alluded to in the last paragraph of the foregoing extract, were Sixtus IV. and Alexander VI. In former numbers of this journal, we have made some remarks on the characters of these two men;† and the facts of their history must have been indeed notorious, to have wrung such a sentence of condemnation from the pen of a Roman Catholic writer as that which we have just quoted. Sixtus IV., has been charged with unnatural crimes; and it is recorded that he devised a new mode of replenishing the sacred treasury—namely, the establishment of brothels in Rome! It would be superfluous to say a word about Pope Alexander VI. A Romish historian was obliged to combine three of the most atrocious monsters to be found in the annals of pagan Rome, in order to obtain any thing like a parallel to the enormities of this man. Nero, Caligula, and Heliogabalus must be united, in order to shadow forth the character of— if it may be said without impiety—this vicar of Christ. His next successor but one, Julius II., scarcely, if at all, fell short of his wickedness. Perjury, poisoning, assassination, drunkenness, unnatural crime, were laid to his charge. He was, moreover, a ferocious and merciless soldier. It was a saying of those times, that the earth drank in more blood in a single day, shed through his means, than he himself and his fellow-revellers had drunk wine during his whole pontificate. Such were the characters of the men who occupied the papal chair, and were the infallible deposi-

tories of the Roman Catholic faith, at the close of the fifteenth century!

It is with much reluctance that we have cited some of the foregoing particulars; but when Roman Catholic controversialists attack the conduct of the Reformers, and impugn the sincerity of their motives, we are compelled to open the pages of *their own* historians, and to point out to them there the scenes of iniquity perpetrated at the very time of the Reformation, by the supreme rulers of their Church, which claims to be *exclusively* holy and infallible. Without some knowledge of the facts to which we have alluded, it would be impossible for the ordinary reader to form any notion of the fearful torrent of vice and immorality, which Savonarola, alone and almost unaided, undertook to stem. Nothing, as it appears to us, but the greatest singleness of purpose, and the most undaunted courage, could have induced him to commence so arduous and almost hopeless a task.

The success of Savonarola's efforts at reform in Florence however, soon became visible to all men. The mass of the people were aroused from their sloth and sensuality, and flocked in crowds to the Church of St. Mark, which soon became unable to contain the multitudes that were drawn together by the fame of the preacher. The writers of that time have left on record statements with regard to the wonderful results of his eloquence, which might almost seem exaggerated, if their testimony was not so clear and unanimous. "He thundered," says one writer, "against the dissolute morals of the age with such marvellous eloquence and such great success that he bent the minds of his auditors whithersoever he desired, and infused a zeal for piety and religion even into the most abandoned breasts. All Italy seemed to hang upon the mouth of the speaker."‡ The times of the ancient prophets, according to another writer, seemed to have returned, and Jonah's preaching to the people of Nineveh, recorded in holy Scripture, was the only fitting counterpart of that of the Dominican monk. "The stories that are told of the Christian eloquence of Savonarola," saith he, "might seem strange and incredible if they were not borne out by his writings. . . . He not only recalled the people of Florence to a more sober and modest course of life, but even stirred up among them a spirit of mourning like that of the Ninevites, from which circumstance the name of 'mourners' was given to them.†" The name *Piagnoni*, or "Weepers," which is here alluded to, and which was commonly given to the followers of Savonarola, is the best proof of the influence wielded by this remarkable man over the susceptible minds of his countrymen, and of the success of his efforts for their improvement. So high was his character for piety and zeal, that Lorenzo de' Medici, although personally hostile to Savonarola, received him when he was on his death-bed, in 1492, and asked for his benediction.

It soon became manifest to the earnest mind of Savonarola that the greatest enemies and obstacles to a reform in morals and religion were the bishops and clergy of the Church of Rome. He saw plainly, that if any permanent improvement among the people was to be effected, the whole system of that Church must be thoroughly reformed. John Picus Mirandola, the friend and biographer of Savonarola, and who was intimately acquainted with his opinions, draws the following melancholy picture of the state of the Romish Church at that time, and assigns this as the chief cause which stirred up the Florentine reformer to take the course which he subsequently pursued. "The Popes were openly accused of having obtained the Papedom by craft and stratagem, perfidy and simony, so that scarcely any one could be found who doubted the truth of the assertion. It was likewise alleged that when they had obtained the Papal chair, their time was occupied with harlots and impure men, and the heaping up of gold; and, moreover, that the Cardinals and Bishops who were under them followed their example. Among them there was not even the most moderate regard paid to the worship of God or religion; nay, it was even alleged that some of them did not worship God at all, and uttered contemptuous and reproachful sayings regarding our holy faith. Many of those priests, moreover, who had adopted a religious life, and professed

* In solutos seculi mores detotare cepit, tanta eloquentia, tam felici successu usus, ut audientium animos quo vellet persuasos flecteret . . . adeo ut tota Italia a dicentis ore pendere videretur. Jo. Fr. Picus Mirandola in vita ejus apud Cave, vol. ii, p. 198. Basilii 1741.

† Vincentius Baronius, Apol. Ord. Præd. Tqm. 2, p. p. 230, 231.

* Bellarm. Opera. Concio xxviii. Tom. vi., p. 296. Colon., 1617

† Dublin Review, Sept. 1854, p. 214.

‡ Vide CATHOLIC LAYMAN, November, 1853, p. 123; May, 1854, p. 58.

