



[Existing Remains of the Conventual Buildings.]

## LI.—BERMONDSEY.

### THE ABBEY.

It is a curious circumstance, and one in which the history of many changes of opinion may be read, that within forty years after what remained of the magnificent ecclesiastical foundation of the Abbey of Bermondsey had been swept away, a new conventual establishment has risen up, amidst the surrounding desecration of factories and warehouses, in a large and picturesque pile, with its stately church, fitted in every way for the residence and accommodation of thirty or forty inmates—the Convent of the Sisters of Mercy. We read in the records of our own immediate time, that “A Convent was built adjoining the Roman Catholic chapel, in Parker’s Row, in the year 1838, for the order of the Sisters of Mercy. On the 12th of December, 1839, the ceremony of the profession of six of the aforesaid sisters took place in the chapel adjoining. The high mass, performed by Mr. Collinwidge, was celebrated at eleven o’clock, at which the Right Rev. Dr. Griffith assisted; after which the novices were introduced.”\* Subsequently “a sermon was preached by the Rev. Dr. Maguire, and a collection made toward the funds of the convent.” When the sermon was concluded the “profession” took place. The novices, attired in the “pleni-

\* From the ‘History and Antiquities of Bermondsey,’ by G. W. Phillips, p. 101.

tude of worldly ornament," declared in the usual formula that "they renounced the world, and dedicated themselves to works of charity." This ceremony over, they retired and assumed the sober garb of "Sisters of Mercy." "The assemblage of spectators was most numerous, and the collection apparently a very good one." One of the nuns "was the Lady Barbara Eyre (second sister of Francis Earl of Newburgh), who has been a liberal benefactress to the chapel and convent, and has taken the vows under the name of Sister Mary." The remaining nuns were Miss Ponsonby (a convert), now Sister Vincent; Miss Conner, now Sister Ursula; Miss Laleham, now Sister Xaiver; and Sister Theresa, and Sister Joseph, whose worldly designations are not mentioned.

With the abstract utility of such institutions we have here nothing to do, but we may observe that the building, &c., of the Sisters of Mercy, as well as the order to which they belong, are of an interesting character. The church is really a fine edifice, in the plain but noble pointed architecture of a very early period. The confessionals, the gilt altar-piece, with the tapers on each side, and the square black board on the wall in the aisle, covered with small printed papers, desiring the prayers of the faithful for the souls of the different deceased persons mentioned in them, beginning with the touching motto from Job, "Have pity on me! have pity on me! at least you, my friends;" and ending with the phrase, "Requiescat in pace," all remind you of the ancient religion, here again established on the spot where it flourished so many centuries ago.

The names of ancient places form a fruitful subject for the display of learning and ingenuity, and if the results are not generally so satisfactory as might be desired in the way of producing conviction, they are seldom destitute of interest, and are sometimes positively entertaining. In the instance of Bermondsey, the oldest known explanation of the name is, that *Beormund* was in very ancient times the Saxon proprietor of the place *ea* or *eye*, which in Saxon signifies water, and is here supposed to denote the nature of the soil. Wilkinson, in his account of the Abbey,\* adds that the words *ea*, or *eye*, "are frequent in the names of places whose situation on the banks of rivers renders them insular and marshy." If true, this explanation may apply to other places in and near London as well as Bermondsey. Battersea, for instance, is very similarly situated with regard to the Thames. But a more fanciful explanation of the name is given by the writer already mentioned in a note, where he says that "in the Saxon language *beorn* signifies a nobleman or prince, and *mund* peace or security; and when to these is added the termination *ea*, water, the word Bermondsey may signify 'the prince's defence by the river.' This interpretation may probably show the original use to which the manor was applied."

Looking, then, upon the original Bermondsey as a kind of marshy island when the tide was out, and a wide expanse of water when it was in, till gradually reclaimed and made useful, one cannot help being struck with the many indications of the old state of things yet remaining, although the *present* Bermondsey be densely covered with habitations and warehouses. The descent down that long flight of steps at the foot of London Bridge tells you how low lie the terri-

\* *Londina Illustrata*.

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tories you are about to explore ; the numerous wharfs, and docks, and water-courses, and ditches, which bound and intersect so considerable a portion of it, seem but so many memorials of the once potent element ; the very streets have a damp *feel* about them, and in the part known as Jacob's Island the overhanging houses, and the little wooden bridges that span the stream, have, notwithstanding their forlorn look, something of a Dutch expression. In short, persons familiar with the history of the place may everywhere see that Beormund's Ea still exists, but that it has been embanked and drained—that it has grown populous, busy, commercial. Its manufacturing prosperity, however, strikingly contrasts with the general aspect of Bermondsey. Its streets generally are but dreary-looking places ; where, with the exception of a picturesque old tenement, projecting its story beyond story regularly upwards, and fast “ nodding to its fall,” or the name of a street suggestive of some agreeable reflections, there is little to gratify the delicate eye. The alleys and courts in particular with which this extensive neighbourhood abounds are of the most wretched-looking character, and inhabited by an equally wretched race, if we may judge by the squalid aspect of the shivering, half-clad, and frequently shoeless creatures we see going in and out. In this circumstance the site of the once-famous Priory of Bermondsey reminds us of the site of St. Bartholomew, which is still, to a certain extent, and was a few years ago much more so, occupied by houses and a population presenting similar aspects. It were perhaps a bold speculation to ask if there be not something of cause and effect in this ; yet, when we remember the magnificent hospitalities of the old and wealthier monasteries, there seems nothing improbable in the supposition that a large number of the poorer classes of the people would gather around them, as it were, for shelter ; and, once there, we need not wonder to find them still clinging to the place three centuries after their benefactors disappeared from it. Inhabitants of this kind are slow to move, and still slower is the process of effacing the character which they have impressed upon it, when they do leave. Noble arches here and there bestride the streets of Bermondsey, bearing up a railway, with its engines puffing like so many overworked giants, and its rapid trains of passengers ; lofty and handsome piles of warehouses are occasionally passed ; an elegant free-school enriches one part, and a picturesque church another : but they all serve by contrast to show more vividly the unpleasant features of the neighbourhood, and, whilst they cannot but command the spectator's admiration, make him at the same time wonder how they got there. The answer is at hand. There is great industry in Bermondsey, and the wretchedness is more on the surface than in the depths of this quarter of the town. What modern Bermondsey is, we shall describe in our next paper.

The earliest mention of the Priory occurs in the account of Bermondsey in Domesday ; and it is interesting to notice the comparative solitude of the place at that time, when “ woodland” could be afforded for “ hogs” so near the city. From the Conqueror's record it appears that he, the king, was then lord of the manor, as Harold had been before him. It was then rated, including Rotherhithe, to the land-tax at twelve hides, which, according to the computation usual in the midland counties, of 120 acres to a hide or carucate, would amount to above 1400 acres. The same computation would make the arable

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land amount to 960 acres. There was also *a new and fair church*, with twenty acres of meadow, and as much woodland as yielded pannage for a number of hogs, the lord receiving five by way of payment from the owners. The demesne land was one carucate occupied by the lord himself, and four carucates in the tenure of twenty-five villains, and thirty-three bordars.\* Thirteen burgage tenements in London were also held of this manor, at the rent of fifteen pounds, and the Earl of Moriton (Morton) possessed a hide of land, on which, it appears from another part of the record, he had a mansion-house. The “new and fair church” here mentioned was that belonging to the Priory.

In the ‘Chronicles of Bermondsey’ (a manuscript preserved among the Harleian collection, to which we are indebted for the greater part of what information we possess as to this once-famous monastery) we find the writer, most probably a monk of Bermondsey, before noticing the foundation of his own house, referring in the following terms to an event which had occurred five years before, in connexion with another establishment: “Anno Domini 1077, Lanzo, first prior of St. Pancras, Lewes, came into England;” and if we look into the charter of that priory we see very clearly his reasons for so doing: for we have there recorded the circumstances which brought about the introduction of the order, to which both Lewes and Bermondsey belonged, into this country; and very interesting circumstances they are. The charter in question was granted by William Earl of Warren, who came over with the Conqueror; and in it that nobleman gives us the following history. It appears that he, with the Lady Gunfreda, his wife, were going on a pilgrimage to St. Peter’s at Rome, and in their passage through France and Burgundy visited divers monasteries to make their orisons; but understanding in Burgundy that they could not in safety proceed with their purpose, on account of the war which was then carrying on between the Pope and the Emperor, they took up their abode in the great monastery of St. Peter at Cluny in that country, and there paid their devotions to the saint. The appearances of sanctity, religion, and charity which they met with in that abbey were great beyond their expectation; and these, together with the special respect shown to them by the prior, in the abbot’s absence, and the whole convent, who admitted them to their fraternity, charmed them, and raised their esteem both for the order and the House of Cluny above all others. And because, long before that time, the earl and his lady had determined, by the advice of Lanfranc, Archbishop of Canterbury, to found some religious house to make atonement for their sins, and for the welfare of their souls, they forthwith resolved that it should be rather of the Cluniac than of any other order. They therefore, soon after, sent over their request to Abbot Hugh, and the convent of Cluny, that they would favour them with two, three, or four monks out of their flock; and the intention was to give them a church, anciently dedicated to St. Pancras, under the castle of Lewes, and which the earl and countess purposed at the

\* The original word *villains* appears to have meant simply the cultivators of the soil of a villa, or township. Their position was superior to the lowest class, the *servi* or *serfs*, for, although their lives and personal property were to a great extent at the disposal of the lord, they had a right of maintenance out of the land, from which they could not be separated; they formed, it is supposed, the origin of the present copyholders. The exact meaning of the word *bordar*, or *bordarii*, is unknown. Maitland calls them cottagers.

setting out to endow with lands and possessions sufficient for the maintenance of twelve monks. The abbot at first made great difficulty in the affair, and seemed unwilling to comply, as the proposed place of abode for his monks was to be a long way off, in another land, and especially as the sea would be between them and the parent convent; but understanding that the earl had obtained licence from King William to introduce monks of their order into England, and being satisfied of his approbation thereof, he became reconciled to the proposal, and agreed to send them four monks of his convent, *Lanzo* being chief. . . . “And thus it was,” says the earl, “that I and my wife procured a convent of Cluniac monks in England.”\* The first difficulty got over, other establishments of Cluniacs were soon formed in England; Wenlock was founded in 1080, and Bermondsey two years later. A citizen was the chief benefactor in the present instance; his name, Aylwin Child; who, through the favour of the eminent churchman Lanfranc, Archbishop of Canterbury, obtained four Cluniac monks from another of the great Cluniac houses—the monastery of La Charité in Normandy. The Cluniacs, it may be necessary to observe, were the first offshoot of the Benedictine branch of monachism, and had their origin, like the parent tree, in the desire to improve upon the previous discipline. The reformation desired by the sterner Benedictines was begun by Bernon, abbot of Gigni, in Burgundy, but consummated by Odo, abbot of Cluny, about 912: he, therefore, is chiefly looked on as the founder of the order of Cluniacs.

A brief view of their customs may be acceptable. The following extract is from Stevens’s translation of the French history of the Monastic Orders, given in his continuation of Dugdale, and transcribed in the great edition of the ‘*Monasticon*.’ “They every day sung two solemn masses, at each of which a monk of one of the choirs offered two hosts. . . . If any one would celebrate mass on Holy Thursday, before the solemn mass was sung, he made no use of light, because the new fire was not yet blessed. The preparation they used for making the bread which was to serve for the sacrifice of the altar is worthy to be observed. They first chose the wheat, grain by grain, and washed it very carefully. Being put into a bag, appointed only for that use, a servant, known to be a just man, carried it to the mill, washed the grindstones, covered them with curtains above and below, and having put on himself an alb, covered his face with a veil, nothing but his eyes appearing. The same precaution was used with the meal. It was not bouted till it had been well washed; and the warden of the church, if he were either priest or deacon, finished the rest, being assisted by two other religious men, who were in the same orders, and by a lay brother particularly appointed for that business. These four monks, when matins were ended, washed their faces and hands: the three first of them did put on albs; one of them washed the meal with pure clean water, and the other two baked the hosts in the iron moulds; so great was the veneration and respect the monks of Cluny paid to the holy Eucharist.” The sites of the mill and the bakehouse of Bermondsey Abbey are both yet traceable.

The rapidity with which the new order spread was most extraordinary; before any very great length of time had elapsed there were at least two thousand religious houses looking up to the Abbot of Cluny as their spiritual head. We may

\* *Monasticon*, vol. v. p. 1.



judge of the wealth and influence of the House of Cluny by the fact, that in 1245 it was able to entertain within its walls, and without disarranging the habits of the four hundred monks resident in it, the reigning Pope, twelve cardinals, a patriarch, three archbishops, the King of France, his mother, and three of his sons, the Emperor of Constantinople, and dukes and lords too many to enumerate. The other chief foreign houses at that time were those of St. Martin des Champs, at Paris, and La Charité. The building belonging to the latter was considered the finest in the kingdom. No doubt the Priory of Bermondsey must have been here similarly distinguished for its architectural grandeur; for although no portion of the chief feature, the church, has been preserved to us even in engravings, the long list of benefactors, occupying several folio pages of the 'Monasticon,' is of itself a sufficient testimony. Among those benefactors we find the names of William Rufus, who gave to the monks the manor and manor-house, or palace, then standing there; Robert Bloet, Bishop of Lincoln, and Chancellor of England; Mary, sister to Maud (good Queen Maud), the wife of Henry I.; Henry I. himself; King Stephen; John, son of Hubert de Burgh; and a host of other distinguished persons. Some of the gifts are sufficiently curious. Thus in 1152 Alan Pirot gave six thousand herrings and one acre of land. The first Prior of Bermondsey was Peter, one of the four monks of La Charité. Among his successors we need only mention Richard, elected prior in 1210, who built an almshouse or hospital adjoining the monastery for poor children and converts, called St. Saviour's Hospital, to which Agnes, sister of Thomas à Becket, was also a benefactor; John de Causancia, during whose rule the Priory became involved in trouble, Causancia and several monks being arrested on account of their having received some rebels into their house for shelter, supposed to be adherents of the Earl of Lancaster, who had been defeated at Boroughbridge; and Richard Dunton (1372), the first English prior, the previous heads of the monastery having all been appointed by the Abbot of Cluny. This last-mentioned change was in consequence of the priory having been restored, after its sequestration with the other alien houses in the previous reign, by Richard II., who released it from its subjection to Cluny, made a *denizen* instead of an *alien* monastery of it, and at the same time raised it to the rank of an abbey. Two hundred marks was the price of this favour. This was not the only benefit conferred on the house by Prior Dunton: he rebuilt the cloister and refectory, and in 1387 covered the nave with lead, made new glass windows in the presbytery, and gilt tables for the high and morning altars. Why he did not stay to enjoy the honours of the abbacy, so peculiarly his own, we know not; just at the period in question he resigned, and John Attilburg was created abbot by Pope Boniface IX., at the request of Richard II.

The few brief and incidental notices of the conventual buildings, included in the foregoing pages, are in effect all that have been preserved. The records of incidents connected with the history of the monastery are not much more numerous; but what may be wanting in this respect through the loss of the records, &c. in the general wreck at the dissolution, is more than compensated for by the interest which attaches to those which do exist. The least important we shall dismiss first. Provincial Chapters it appears were frequently held here; and the King occasionally used it for important state councils. Thus during the

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Christmas of 1154, Henry II., immediately after his coronation, held an important meeting here of his nobles, to consult with them on the general state of the country, and the measures it was advisable to adopt. In the reign of Henry III., many of the nobility having determined upon an expedition to the Holy Land, met at Bermondsey, to arrange the order of their journey. Many eminent and noticeable persons were buried in the church; among whom may be mentioned Mary, sister of good Queen Maud, before mentioned; Leofstane, provost, shrieve (sheriff), or domesman of London, 1115; and Margaret de la Pole, 1473. In 1397 the body of the murdered Duke of Gloucester, (murdered at Calais, there is little doubt, by the order of Richard II., his nephew,) was brought to Bermondsey, and placed in the church, where it remained till the interment in Westminster Abbey.

Hospitality was one of the duties enjoined upon the inmates of religious houses, and to the last it appears to have been the duty they most constantly and willingly fulfilled. In the cases of persons of high rank the reception of visitors was an affair of great ceremony and importance. Bermondsey had at different times two visitors, to whom we may be sure every possible honour was done: the first of these was Katherine, the wife of Henry V., the French Princess whom Shakspeare has made so familiar to us in connexion with the blunt wooing of her gallant lover, and by her own pleasant attempts as a student of the English language, and who alone perhaps of all her country's children could have so quickly reconquered France from the conqueror, as she now did, by throwing around him the nuptial tie. Few marriages promising so much of state convenience have ended in giving so much individual happiness, as Henry enjoyed with his young and beautiful bride. His early death was grieved by all; his courtiers and nobles wept and sobbed round his death-bed: what, then, must have been *her* feelings at his loss? Fortunately, perhaps, Katherine was not present at the last moment, nor did she learn the dreadful tidings for some days afterwards. It was to receive this distinguished visitor that some years later the monks of Bermondsey were suddenly summoned from all parts of the monastery by the stroke on one of the great bells, twice repeated, who, hurrying into the church, robed themselves, and prepared everything for the reception of the new comer. Upon the Queen's near approach, two of the great bells would ring out a peal of welcome, and then the abbot would advance to meet her, saluting her with his blessing, and sprinkling holy water over her. The procession then entered the church, and made a stand before the crucifix, where the visitor prayed. Service in honour of the Saviour as the patron saint followed; the singing-boys in the choir sang, the organ played, and at the termination of the whole the Queen would find the best accommodation the Abbey could furnish provided for her use. She appears to have found all she desired, for she remained at Bermondsey till her death. One little incident has been recorded on the subject of her residence here, which is supposed to have been caused in some way by the dissatisfaction of the court at her second marriage, with Owen Tudor, a gentleman of Wales, and, through this match, the founder of the Tudor dynasty. On the 1st of January, 1437, her son, the young Henry VI., sent to her at Bermondsey a token of his affectionate remembrance, in the shape of a tablet of gold, weighing thirteen ounces, on which was a crucifix set with sapphires and pearls. She was then, no doubt, very ill,

for two days later she died. There is a striking connexion between this and the next distinguished visitor, Elizabeth of York, a lady who, if not one of the most interesting of female characters in herself, is unquestionably so from the circumstances of her strange and eventful history. She came to Bermondsey quite as much a prisoner as a visitor, and she owed that imprisonment to the man whom she herself had been to a considerable extent the means of placing on the throne,



[Queen Elizabeth Woodville.]

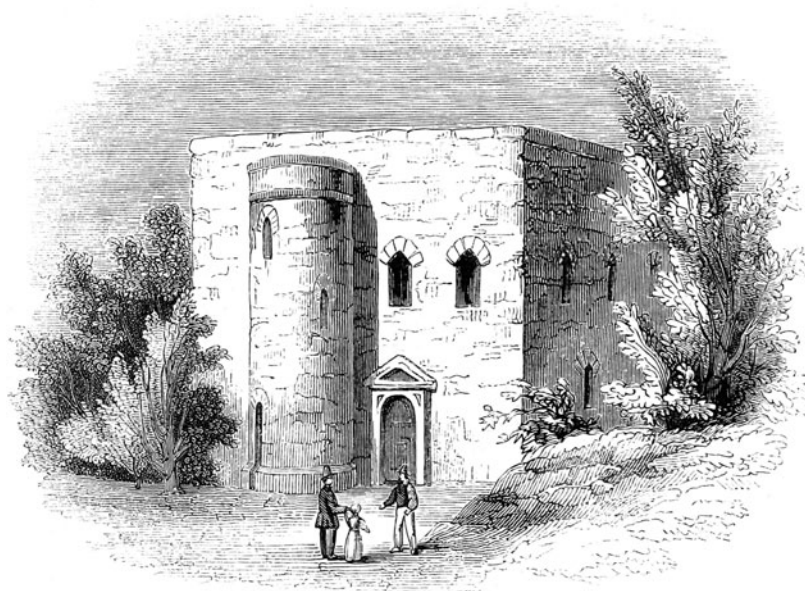
Henry VII., the grandson of the widow of Henry V., and of her second husband, Owen Tudor. That two such women should meet in the same place, to spend the last years of their lives, forms, in our opinion, no ordinary coincidence. The history of Elizabeth of York, though but an episode of that of Bermondsey, is so full of romance, and so closely connected with it, by her imprisonment and death within its walls, that the ancient priory may not improbably be freshly remembered through those circumstances, when all others might have else failed to preserve more than the barest and driest recollections of the great house of the Cluniacs. Her history is, indeed, from first to last a romance, but a romance of a stern and melancholy nature; not destitute of sweet passages on which the imagination would love to rest but cannot, for there is always to be seen, through the opening vista of the future, ghastly and monstrous shapes, from which there is no averting the eye. It was on a visit to Jaquenetta, Duchess of Bedford, then married to a second husband, Sir Richard Woodville, that Edward IV., the handsomest, most accomplished, and most licentious man of his time, first beheld the duchess's daughter, Elizabeth Gray, the widow of Sir John Gray, a Lancastrian, slain at the second battle of St. Alban's. The knight's estates had been forfeited to Edward, and the young widow, who is said to have been as eloquent as she



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was beautiful, availing herself of the opportunity, threw herself at the king's feet, and implored him, for the sake of her innocent and helpless children, to reverse the attainder. The irresistible petitioner rose with more than the grant of what she had asked—the king's heart was hers. Edward, perhaps for the first time, was seriously touched; and, to the astonishment of the nation generally, and to the rage of no small portion of the King's own partisans, the Yorkists, the King, some months after, at a solemn assembly of prelates and nobles, in the ancient abbey of Reading, announced his marriage with the widow of the fallen Lancastrian knight; and, amid the surprise which prevailed throughout the assemblage, the King's brother, the Duke of Clarence, and the Earl of Warwick, led the *Queen* into the hall, and caused her in that character to be welcomed by all present. Thus ends one phase of her history. In the next we behold her again as a widow: but this time her widowhood has brought her new and more anxious public duties; she is not merely a mother, but the mother of the young King Edward V. and of his brother the Duke of York. Into the particulars of the momentous period which includes the death of the young princes in the Tower, of course we are not about to enter; but it may be permitted to us to observe, that few parents ever have endured keener agonies for their children than this unfortunate lady. The wild rumours that so quickly floated about as to the intentions of the Duke of Gloucester, the sudden shedding of the blood of her son and brother at Pomfret (Lords Gray and Rivers), the messages and deputations to and fro between the Protector and the Sanctuary at Westminster,



[Sanctuary, Westminster, from a sketch by Dr. Stukeley, before its destruction in 1775.]

where she had taken refuge with her youngest son, distracting her with conflicting thoughts—one moment fearing to give the young prince up to destruction, the next fearing to bring that destruction on him by indiscreet jealousy, or by thwarting Gloucester's views—all this must have been terrible to the lately-made

widow, had nothing remained behind. But when at last, calling for her child, she delivered him up to the Cardinal Archbishop; and, as soon as she had done so, burst into an uncontrollable fit of anguish, she but too rightly felt she had lost both her children.

In the interval between the death of the princes and that of their murderer, Richard, occurs the most unromantic, and in every way most unsatisfactory, part of the history of one whose misfortunes, so unexampled for their severity, make us regret to meet with any incidents that tend to deprive her of our sympathy through the lessening of our respect. Suffice it to say, that whilst at one period we find her eagerly engaging in the scheme proposed of marrying the Earl of Richmond to her daughter Elizabeth; at another, when the prospect looked less bright for the exile, she appears to have listened to Richard's overtures, first of marrying her daughter Elizabeth to his son, and when that son died, of giving her to himself. Whether there may not have been some dissimulation practised, in the hope of silencing the fears of Richard, who was aware of the project with regard to Richmond, cannot now be known, but the circumstances render such a supposition not improbable. Whatever her conduct at this period, there is, unhappily, no doubt as to her subsequent misfortunes. The king, Henry VII., certainly did redeem the promise as to the marriage made by the Earl of Richmond, but it was done so tardily and so ungraciously, that the very people were disgusted at his conduct; and by their sentiments we may judge of the mother's. But this was not all. In the month of November, 1486, an extensive insurrection broke out in Ireland, at the head of which was, nominally, a youth who it was pretended was the Earl of Warwick (then in reality confined in the Tower), the son of the late Duke of Clarence, brother to Edward IV. A great council was immediately held at the Charter House near Richmond, where, first, a general pardon was resolved on, free from all exceptions, and the second resolution was (a curious commentary on the first) to arrest Elizabeth Woodville, the Queen Dowager. This is altogether one of the most inexplicable of those many and subtle strokes of policy that mark the history of the English king, whose "life," it has been well observed, "produces much the same effect on the mind as the perusal of the celebrated manual of Machiavelli, most of whose notions he anticipated and put into practice."\* The queen was immediately arrested, deprived of all her property, and placed a close prisoner in the monastery of Bermondsey. Henry's historian, Bacon, may well observe, "whereat there was much wondering that a weak woman, for the yielding to the menaces and promises of a tyrant, [he is alluding to her transactions with Richard III.,] after such a distance of time wherein the king had showed no displeasure or alteration, but much more after so happy a marriage between the king and her daughter, blest with issue male, [only two or three weeks before,] should upon a sudden mutability or disclosure of the king's mind be so severely handled:" for such it appears was the motive for this arrest set forth by the king. No one, however, believed in the truth of the allegation; and Bacon, following the chronicler Hall, gives a remarkable explanation of the affair. Having observed that the prompter of the young counterfeit of the Earl of Warwick, a priest, had never seen the latter, he continues, "so it cannot be, but that some *great* person,

\* 'Pictorial England,' vol. ii. p. 318.