RICHARD THE THIRD,

AS DUKE OF GLOUCESTER, AND KING OF ENGLAND.

CHAPTER I.

Prejudices entertained against Richard III.—Origin of the marvellous tales associated with his memory, based on tradition, not on history.—Peculiar position of Richard.—Dearth of historical writers in his reign.—State of society at the Plantagenet dynasty.—The battles of Hastings and Bosworth compared.—General coincidence of results arising from Harold's and Richard's defeat and death.—Favourable circumstances attending the accession of William I. and Henry VII.—Contrary effect on their deceased rivals.—Richard the victim of party spirit and political malevolence.

Few of the founders of new dynasties have been more unsparingly reviled, few men more bitterly calumniated than Richard the Third.

Length of years has not softened the asperity with which a hostile faction delighted to magnify his evil deeds, and which did not allow any one redeeming quality to appear in their extenuation; neither have more enlightened times brought to this monarch's aid a continuous biographical narrative to rescue his memory from at least a portion of the aggravated crimes with which the romance of early days and the ever prevalent love of the marvellous have delighted to invest his brief career.

From our very childhood his name is pronounced with terror; supernatural appearances both at his birth* and his death† have been freely circulated to increase the odium which attaches to the remembrance of one who, from his cradle, seemed marked as a monster, hideous alike to contemplate or describe.‡ Nursery tales§ have united with history‖ and tradition,¶ in rendering him a

* "King Richard III., whose monstrous birth foreshowed his monstrous proceedings, for he was born with all his teeth, and hair to his shoulders."—*Camden's Remains*, p. 353.

† "The fame went that he had the same night (the eve of his death) a dreadful and a terrible dream, for it seemed to him, being asleep, that he saw divers images, like terrible devils, which pulled and hauled him, not suffering him to take any quiet or rest."—*Grafton's Chronicle*, p. 219.

‡ Rous, Hist. Reg. Ang. p. 215. Polydore Virgil, p. 562.

§ The familiar legend of "The Children in the Wood," has been considered to be, and apparently with reason, an obscure and disguised relation of the suspected murder of his nephews by King Richard III. (*Sharon Turner's Middle Ages*, vol. iii. p. 407); and whoever peruses this tale, under that impression, and compares the "doleful story" of the two babes in the ballad, with Sir Thomas More's historical narrative of the "dolourous end of those babes," (*More's Rycharde III.*, p. 127,) cannot fail of being struck with the general resemblance it bears to leading facts connected with the tradition of the death of the young princes. See Appendix A.

‖ Sir Thomas More's Hist. of Kynge Rycharde III., p. 8. Lord Bacon's Hist. of King Henry VII., p. 2.

¶ Sir Richard Baker's Chronicle of the Kings of England, p. 235.

by-word and reproach to posterity; and by the aid of the drama,* the perverted representations of malignant adversaries† have been impressed, in language the most powerful, and through a form the most attractive, on the minds of successive generations.‡

It is time that at least some justice was done to Richard III. as a monarch, however opinions may vary as regards the measure of his guilt as a man.

This can only be effected by taking the unerring voice of truth as a guide, by banishing from remembrance all merely traditional legends, and by striving to form an impartial decision from well-attested and indisputable facts, gleamed not from the annalists of after times, or from the party statements of over-zealous friends on the one hand, and virulent enemies on the other, but derived from cotemporary authority, and the unbiassed testimony of eye-witnesses.

The period has long since passed when prejudice could prevail to warp the judgment in historical narration; and few in this age will be disposed to reject the evidence of disinterested cotemporaries, because it overthrows the more marvellous relations of political animosity. It may justly be asked why Richard III. of all the sovereigns of England was so peculiarly the prey of rancour and malevolence? But the reason is obvious. Richard alone, of all his predecessors, was a vanquished and defeated monarch, at a period when personal prowess and heroism formed the standard of respect and admiration. He was the last of his dynasty, the object of especial indignation both to the family of his predecessor, and of hatred and jealousy to his rival. He lived also at a time when national literature was at its lowest ebb,§ from the stagnation which the fury of civil warfare had brought upon letters and the fine arts generally; so that little difficulty presents itself in assigning abundant cause for the scanty intelligence and paucity of materials which contribute to add mystery to the horrors of this dark and savage period. Alternately occupied in fighting for one party, or in defending the cause of the adverse faction, the highest nobles in the land thought only of inciting their infant progeny to deeds of arms, or steeling their young minds against the subtilty and want of faith which so unhappily disgraced the age. The art of printing was as yet scarcely known, so that all accounts, whether historical or traditional, were written in manuscript with great cost and labour: family archives and private memoirs, therefore, must necessarily have been rare at that period; and it cannot be doubted, that the few public documents of the times were influenced by party spirit and prejudiced views.

Of the scanty references that did exist, many of the original MSS. were either wholly destroyed, or the copies so mutilated and injured, not only from the warfare and desolation that pervaded the land arising from civil discord,‖ but also from the destruction of the religious houses which so speedily followed, that, in many important points, doubts can no longer be removed, difficulties solved, or the contradictory statements of cotemporaries be reconciled or explained.

* Shakspeare's Tragedy of Richard III.
† Hall and Holinshed's Chronicles.
‡ Walpole's Historic Doubts, p. 114. § Hume, vol. iv. p. 217.
‖ Some idea may be formed of the fatal consequences which resulted to literature from the ravages of an infuriated mob, even at a much later period than that now under consideration, by referring to Stow's description of the conduct of Wyatt's followers in their attack on the magnificent palace of the Bishop of Winchester, at Bankside, (1554,) in the ancient and valuable library attached to which the books were so numerous, that the historian, in speaking of the numbers which were cut up and wholly destroyed, says, "that men might have gone up to their knees in the leaves so torn out and scattered about."—*Stow's Survey.*

No historian of eminence flourished at the close of the Plantagenet dynasty. No learned biographer or philosophical statesman lived during King Richard's short and turbulent reign, to narrate minutely the combination of circumstances which led to his aspiring to the crown;* and to describe the munificent acts and wise regulations, which, being still preserved in the national archives, and corroborated by rare and valuable manuscripts,† bear evidence indisputable of this monarch's powerful mind and of his comprehensive and vigorous views. These, however, have only recently been made partially known, from attention being directed to the subject, owing to the publication of provincial histories,‡ the examination of municipal records and the correspondence or private diaries of reputable and disinterested cotemporaries.§

On the other hand, biographers and annalists of known ability, encouraged by the patronage bestowed on letters by Henry VII., Richard's successor, used their talents during his long and tranquil reign to laud the victorious sovereign; to perpetuate the wisdom, foresight and piety of him who had brought peace to the desolated land; and to seek or hope for favour and advancement, by eulogizing the reigning prince, and vilifying the fallen monarch.‖ Had Richard III. survived the battle of Bosworth, and lived to perfect, in a series of years, the wise laws, the profound views and judicious measures framed in the course of a few short months, posterity would in all probability have heard but little imputation against the Duke of Gloucester; whilst his ambition and alleged usurpation would have been overlooked, like that of Henry IV. and other of his predecessors, in the benefits

* The chronicler of Croyland, and Rous, the Warwick antiquary, are almost the only cotemporary annalists of King Richard's reign. The first is valuable authority; for the author was "a doctor of canon law, and one of King Edward the Fourth's councillors," (*Cont. Croy. in Gale*, vol. i. p. 557;) but his narrative is brief, being a mere epitome of events, which is the more to be lamented as his facts are authenticated by parliamentary documents. Rous, on the contrary, by dedicating his work, "Historia Regum Anglicæ," to Richard's rival, cannot be considered an impartial authority, even had he not rendered himself unworthy of credit by his contradictory account of this monarch, written previous to the above-named historical work, which was compiled for King Henry VII.—*Supplement to Walpole's Historic Doubts.*

† The Harl. MS. Number 433, contains a register of the grants, &c., which passed the privy-seal or sign manual during the reigns of King Edward V. and King Richard III., consisting of no less than two thousand three hundred and seventy-eight articles. In addition to the above, No. 18 contains manuscripts and collectanies, out of the Parl. Rolls of Richard III., and No. 22 a short abstract, taken out of the Parl. Rolls, of the private acts during the reign of Richard III.—See *Preface to the Catalogue of the Harl. MSS.*, p. 16.

‡ See Drake's Hist. of York; Surtees's Hist. of Durham; Whittaker's Hist. of Richmondshire, and other eminent northern historians.

§ See also several of the works recently published by the Camden Society, together with that valuable collection of original letters, entitled "The Paston Correspondence."

‖ Bernard Andreas, the biographer of Henry VII., was poet laureate to that monarch, and tutor to Prince Arthur, his eldest son. His work, which is full of curious matter, has never been published, but the manuscript may be found in the Cott. MSS. Dom. A. xviii. It was written in the year 1500. Polydore Virgil, Dean of Wells, historiographer to Henry VII., completed his history, which was begun in the year 1505, under the immediate patronage of that monarch's second son and successor, King Henry VIII. Fabian, the city chronicler, was a zealous Lancastrian, and compiled his work during the reign of Henry VII. Lord Bacon's well-known life of this sovereign, though not written until after the succession of James I., was a transcript from the Tudor historians, from whose chronicles he obtained the leading facts, which he perpetuated in his own more finished style of composition.—See *Archæologia*, vol. xxvii. p. 153.

which resulted to the realm at large from his powerful rule, and the brilliancy which marked his kingly career.

But it was otherwise decreed. Richard was a fallen and a vanquished foe, the victim of that all-absorbing ambition on which his enemies have grounded their accusations, and which was more than a counterpoise to his legislative zeal and ability. Those faithful and firm friends who could best have testified to his good deeds, or have defended his memory from unjust aspersions, were numbered with himself amongst the slain at Bosworth field. Those who had dealt treacherously with their patron and benefactor felt their consciences soothed, and themselves relieved from odium, by the obloquy that increased tenfold after his death. While the kingdom at large, rejoicing in the union of the Red and White Roses, the contests between which had so long desolated the land with all the misery attending domestic warfare, cared but little that the crimes of King Edward IV., out of courtesy to his daughter, the reigning queen, were laid wholly to the charge of the much-execrated Gloucester, or that the accession of his peacefully disposed successor was left undisputed, and rendered more acceptable to the populace by the unworthy actions and criminal deeds unsparingly ascribed, whether justly or unjustly, to the last monarch of the House of Plantagenet. The superstitious belief in omens, warnings and predictions which peculiarly characterized the period that closed the brief career of King Richard, were industriously promulgated to invest with the terror of supernatural appearances the simplest and most natural events; while the ferocious deeds, which so sullied the brilliant rule of the House of York, withdrawn by common consent from the shoulders of the elder brothers to burden exclusively the memory of the fallen Gloucester, were believed firmly to have been proved, as by a judgment from on high, in the accumulation of untoward events, which so early sealed the fate of one of the bravest soldiers and most potent monarchs of the age in which he flourished.

Except by those well versed in our national history, during the disastrous times that terminated the Plantagenet dynasty, it is scarcely possible to be conceived the state into which England had degenerated; the struggle for pre-eminence between the rival factions having led its inhabitants to despise every acquirement that had a tendency to soften the minds of individuals, or to interfere with the progress of vengeance and ambition. Caxton, who was the chief agent in dispelling the grievous darkness that so filled the land, gives, in his Picture of London,* a feeling portraiture of the existing state of things; but though the magic of his wonderful art gradually swept away the mists that had long enveloped all that was good and great, yet the advantages arising from its powerful influence were experienced less in his own particular time than in after years. Richard III., to whom he dedicated one of the rarest of his works,† and to whose chivalrous feelings and princely demeanour he bears such conclusive testimony, by his eloquent appeal in the preface, lived not long enough to benefit from an invention which, by enumerating the generous and noble qualities of his youth, and perpetuating the wisdom of his legal acts, might have made a powerful contrast in after years with the Tudor chronicles, which detailed only his crimes, whether real or imputed.

But no such favourable circumstance befriended this monarch. His early childhood, from the causes just named, was wrapt in mystery. His maturer years were stigmatized by accusations equally opposed to reason and unsupported by proof; while his entire conduct and actions, from his birth

* See Appendix B.

† The Booke of the Order of Chivalry or Knighthoode: Caxton, 1484.

to his death, are rendered so obscure by the contradictory statements and marvellous circumstances which mingle with some few well-attested facts, that they have hitherto distracted the biographer, and defied the general historian to unravel them. Richard III. was destined to terminate with his brief reign the darkest period, morally speaking, of our national annals; for with his reign terminated that unceasing period of feudal oppression and civil warfare, which, commencing at the Norman conquest and ending with the defeat at Bosworth, is usually designated "the middle ages."

With the Tudor line, as with the Norman race, a new and brighter order of things dawned upon the land. The decisive battles of Hastings and of Bosworth, the most important in a political point of view, perhaps, of any of our domestic contests, were parallel in their subversion of the ancient order of things, and also in the effect which they produced of establishing a distinct chronological era in English history; for with the subjugation of the Saxon monarchs and the accession of William I. commenced that chivalric though despotic period which reached its climax during the brilliant reigns of the Plantagenets, and terminated in the ruin and downfall of that divided house, in the person of its last representative, Richard III. On the other hand, Henry VII., from whom all subsequent monarchs of this realm have descended, may justly be considered the founder of those liberties, and the father of that civil and political freedom, which so distinguish the last three centuries from the state of tyrannical oppression that immediately preceded it; rendering the one the age of proud nobility and servile vassalage; the other that of an enlightened aristocracy, with a generous and free-born people.

The coincidence, indeed, of circumstances and results, arising from the defeat respectively of Richard and Harold, were most remarkable as relates to their important effect on the kingdom at large. Henry of Richmond, like William the Conqueror, ascended the throne with all the fame attendant on victory; and profited no less by the odium that must ever attach to the violent and unjust deposition of a youthful sovereign.* Their claims, too, were alike aided by the religious enthusiasm already kindled in their favour, from their connection with the pious kings Edward the Confessor and Henry VI.; the former canonized as Saint Edward, the other only denied a corresponding exaltation in consequence of the enormous fees which were demanded by Pope Julius for the apotheosis of "Saint Henry of Lancaster."† The reign of the latter, also, like that of the former monarch, encouraged by its weakness the preponderating influence of an overbearing aristocracy, and they tended, in like manner, to facilitate the revolution by which that powerful body was in its turn subdued. Again, the circumstance of Edward the Confessor being the son of a Norman princess‡ gave early encouragement to the expectations of his kinsman, and furnished the duke at his decease with a pretence for asserting his right to the crown; so, also, it is well known that Henry VI. early prognosticated the succession of Henry of Richmond, and that his words, considered prophetic in that superstitious age, greatly

* Harold I. was appointed regent of England, and Richard III. was nominated lord protector of the realm during the minority of the lawful heirs of the throne; and both these princes deposed their sovereigns, who were minors, and took upon them the royal prerogative.—*Sandford*, book i. p. 4; book v. p. 407.

† "The general opinion was, that Pope Julius was too deare, and that the king would not come to his rates."—*Bacon's Henry VII.*, p. 227.

‡ William I. of England, and seventh Duke of Normandy, was cousin to Edward the Confessor; his mother Emma, the wife of King Etheldred, being the daughter of Richard fifth Duke of Normandy, who was uncle to William, surnamed the Conqueror.—*Sandford*, book i. p. 1.

aided the claims,—that of being the son of a Lancastrian princess,*—on which Richmond based his pretensions to the crown. The imbecility of the lawful heirs to the crown, the unfortunate Edward of Warwick† and "the gentle" Edgar Atheling, who is described as wholly unfit to govern, both in mind and body,‡ by destroying the hopes of the advocates for legitimate succession, and precluding opposition to the invaders, left the crown open respectively to the founders of the Norman and Tudor lines; who, though cementing eventually the old and new dynasties, by marriage with the female representative of the former, were, nevertheless, more palpably usurpers than the monarchs whom they so unsparingly branded as such; in consequence of legitimate male issue being alive,§ when they seized the throne by violence, and established themselves on it by right of conquest. Finally, the discontent of the opposing parties speedily manifesting itself in insurrection, conspiracy and revolt, the policy of William, as also of Henry VII., aimed at subduing the power of the nobility, weakening the authority of the clergy and augmenting the liberties of the people. In both cases the accession of these monarchs formed epochs of mental cultivation in their subjects, which could not fail to reflect brilliancy on their reigns: the Norman princes, by their love of minstrelsy and poetry, their patronage of letters and of learned men, laying the foundation of that thirst for knowledge which reached its climax under the Tudor monarchs

* Henry VII. of England, and second Earl of Richmond of that descent, was nephew to Henry VI., being the son of that monarch's half-brother, Edmund Tudor, espoused to the Lady Margaret Beaufort, only child of John Duke of Somerset, the grandson of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster.—*Life of Margaret Beaufort*, p. 43.

† Edward, Earl of Warwick was about 10 years of age (*Dugdale*, vol. ii. p. 162), when Henry VII. contested the crown with Richard III. at Bosworth; but in consequence of the severities and close imprisonment which this hapless prince had endured from his early childhood, his mind had become so enfeebled that he was altogether incapacitated from being the leader of his party or assuming the reigns of government. Nevertheless, as the only surviving son of George, Duke of Clarence, King Richard's elder brother, he was the lawful inheritor of the English throne upon his uncle's decease, and after the disappearance of the young princes his cousins; for although the daughters of Edward IV. were alive and at liberty, yet up to this period of English history females had not exercised the regal authority in Britain.

‡ Milton, Hist. Brit., book vi. p. 82.

§ On the demise of Edward the Confessor, there were three surviving children of his nephew Edward, son of Edmund Ironside, who, had not that prince died before his uncle, would by heirship have succeeded to the throne. These consisted of a son, Edgar Atheling, constitutionally weak, but the undoubted heir of the crown, and his young sisters Margaret and Christina. Prince Edgar was acknowledged king upon the decease of his great uncle, but was speedily dethroned by his kinsman Harold, who had been appointed regent during the young king's minority. Edgar lived under Harold's government until that prince was slain by the Norman conqueror; upon whose usurpation a pension for life was settled upon the dethroned monarch. Of the two daughters, Margaret, the elder, married Malcolm III., King of Scotland, and Christina took the veil. By the subsequent union of Matilda, Margaret's daughter, with the youngest son of King William, eventually Henry I., the Saxon and Norman lines were united.—*Milton's History of Britain*, book vi.; *Sandford*, book i. On the accession of Henry VII., seven legitimate heirs to the crown were living, viz., the five daughters of Edward IV. and the son and daughter of George, Duke of Clarence, who had been put to death in the Tower. Of these, the unhappy Edward of Clarence, a state prisoner from his infancy, was even more rigidly guarded than before by the Tudor monarch; failure of issue in the deceased king, Richard III., having rendered Prince Edward the last male survivor of his ill-fated race. He was finally beheaded by Henry on frivolous accusations, but really from political jealousy, at the early age of twenty-four, in the year 1499; and by the marriage of this monarch with Elizabeth, the eldest of King Edward the Fourth's daughters, the long divided houses of York and Lancaster became united.—*Excerpta Historica*, p. 123.

from the adventitious aid of printing and the encouragement bestowed by Henry VII. and his family on the earliest typographical efforts. It is, therefore, apparent that the founder of the Tudor dynasty must have possessed, as was before stated, the full benefit of cotemporary biographers and able historians to enumerate his virtues and extenuate his errors; while Richard III. was selected by these self-same writers as the victim to exalt the fame and magnify the judicious policy pursued by his more cautious and successful rival.

As the image of the deceased king faded from remembrance, deformity of body, without sufficient co-existing proof,* was gradually associated with alleged deformity of mind; thus strengthening the contrast, bodily as well as mental, between the new monarch and his fallen predecessor—the distorted appearance of the one seeming in unison with his dark and crooked policy;† while the moral and religious habits of the other, being annexed to superiority of form and feature,‡ speedily secured golden opinions for the second Alfred,—"the Solomon of England,"§—and increased to positive frenzy the odium and abhorrence which to this day attach to "Crook-backed Richard," the demon incarnate of prejudice, of superstition, and of political malevolence.‖ Let it not, however, be supposed, that in entering on the arena of controversy respecting the alleged acts of Richard III., any desire is entertained of exalting him into a hero of romance. The crimes laid to his charge, whether real or imaginary, (for this is not the place in which to discuss their validity,) were many and grievous; and his elevation to the crown was marked by transactions which, to speak in the mildest terms, were open to severe condemnation, unmitigable censure. But the same unerring guide, Truth, will equally aid the historian in collecting well-attested facts, whether adduced in corroboration of good or evil deeds; and in the absence of all proof—nay, of even substantial foundation for imputed crimes greater and more heinous than were ever, perhaps, heaped on the memory of any individual,—surely the charitable and truly English feeling claimed for the vilest of malefactors, until he has been tried by credible witnesses and pronounced guilty by upright and disinterested judges, will not be denied to one of the illustrious line of the Plantagenets, when seeking from his countrymen, at the expiration of three centuries, that justice which the fury of party spirit prevented his obtaining at the time he lived.

* Stow, in his valuable work, "The Survey of London," declared, "that he could find no such note of deformity in King Richard III. as historians commonly relate;" and he acknowledged, *viva voce*, that he had spoken with some ancient men, who, from their own sight and knowledge, affirmed that he was of bodily shape comely enough, only of low stature. Now, as "honest John Stowe" was born in 1525, only forty years after Richard's decease, he must have had many facilities for speaking with those who had both known and seen the king; he was also remarkable for his circumstantial detail of the persons of princes, and "very inquisitive," too, in the description of their persons and features.—*Life of Stow*, prefixed to his *Survey of London*, p. xviii., ed. 1720.

† "There never was in any man a greater uniformity of body and mind than was in him, both of them equally deformed. Of body he was but low, crook'd-backed, hook-shouldered, splay-footed, and goggle-eyed; his face little and round, his complexion swarthy, his left arm from his birth dry and withered; born a monster in nature, with all his teeth, with hair on his head and nails on his fingers and toes. And just such were the qualities of his mind."—*Baker's Chronicle*, p. 234.

‡ See Appendix C.

§ Bacon's Henry VII., p. 231.

‖ "Since the heavens have shap'd my body so,
Let hell make crook'd my mind to answer it."
Richard III., Act I. Scene I.