

A Great Irish Bishop.

IRELAND is the most hospitable country in the world. From the days of St. Patrick onwards she has called to herself foster-children from beyond the seas, and taken them to her heart, sealing them with the print of her own individuality, till she, and they, and the rest of the world, have alike forgotten that they were not her children by birth.

A recent book on "Irish Nationality" closes with a list of national heroes, "lofty figures whom the people have exalted with the poetry of their souls and crowned with love and gratitude." Third on the list—midway between "Kildare riding from his tomb on the horse with the silver shoes," and Owen Roe O'Neill, soldier of fortune and leader of forlorn hopes—stands the name of Bishop Bedell.

An alien both by birth and tradition, the representative of an alien Church, at a time when an outburst of popular fury wellnigh swept away both his Church and his nation from the face of his adopted country—what manner of man was this, who won for himself a place in the Irish heart where he is enshrined to this day?

William Bedell came of an English yeoman stock, and was born on Michaelmas Day, 1571; "his birthday," as his son and first biographer quaintly remarks, "presaging him an antagonist against the devil and his angels."

In early life he spent some time in Venice, as Chaplain to the English Ambassador, and won the admiring affection of many leading Italian scholars, including the celebrated Paul Sarpi. But he had been quietly settled for many years in a Suffolk village, when—through the recommendation of Milton's friend Diodati—he was offered the Provostship of Trinity College, Dublin.

"That a private country minister, so far distant and of so retired a life, should be sought for so public and eminent an employment" was strange enough; and a letter of Bedell's

shows how far he had been from seeking it. But after giving a number of reasons which moved him "to reject this offer," he adds :

"On the other hand . . . if God call me . . . I shall obey, if it were not only to go into Ireland, but into Virginia ; yea, though I were not only to meet with troubles, dangers and difficulties, but death itself in the performance."

At length it became clear to him that the call *was* from God.

After a short preliminary visit to Dublin, he returned to England to fetch his wife and family on Michaelmas Day, 1627, his fifty-sixth birthday ; and henceforward the life of St. Michael's warrior was one continuous conflict.

"The eyes of all men," says his son, "were upon him, the mouths of all opened against him. . . . His own nearest friends and relations were no small disheartening to him, as looking upon him and his actings according to the common vote."

It went about at first that he was "a weak man," "which," Bedell writes, with touching humility, "is most true." But those around him soon discovered that, with all his gentleness, this "weak man" would never yield one jot of what he believed to be right ; and before long his wonderful power of winning hearts began to tell.

Of the reforms which are embodied to this day in "Bedell's Statutes," one which roused most criticism was his decree that "the natives of the country should be exercised in the reading of their own language, that they might be the fitter to convert their countrymen."

Suiting example to precept, he had already begun to study Irish himself ; such an extraordinary proceeding, in the eyes of the Fellows, that a report spread about that he was a Papist in disguise ! One Professor, "a man of great learning, zeal, and piety, but over-hot," went so far as to preach against him from the text, "Come out of her, my people."

The sequel to this sermon is told with delightful *naïveté*. Instead of taking any public notice of the affront, Bedell contrived "a private conference in the Professor's own chamber,

where they debated the business largely together, like scholars, all in Latin, without any witness unless a sizar, and parted good friends; and no more was ever heard of that matter, saving only that the Professor afterwards to some of his acquaintance gave the Provost the commendation of a pure Ciceronian as ever he had discoursed with!"

But no sooner had Bedell accomplished his initial reforms, and begun to live down hostility, than the call came to a new battlefield. In 1629 he was nominated to the bishoprics of Kilmore and Ardagh. "Thus," he writes to an intimate friend, in humorous deprecation, "your friend, who never dreamed of this or any other bishopric (more than to be Pope of Rome) is to have two bishoprics at a clap, being insufficient for one!"

He was consecrated on September 13, 1629, and set to work immediately to bring his two dioceses into some sort of order.

It was a herculean labour. The state of things is vividly summed up in Bedell's own words:

"The people almost all popish, the Irish without exception. . . . The (R.C.) Primate himself lives in my parish within two miles of my house; the Bishop in another part of my diocese further off. Each parish hath its priest, and some two or three a-piece. . . . Friars there are in divers places, who . . . by their importunate begging impoverish the people, who indeed are generally very poor, as from that cause so from their paying double tythes to their clergy and ours, from the dearth of corn and the death of cattle these late years, with their contributions to their soldiers and agents: and—which forget not to reckon among other causes—the oppression of the Court Ecclesiastical, which in very truth . . . I cannot excuse and do seek to reform. For my own, there are seven or eight ministers of good sufficiency; and, which is no small cause of the continuance of the people in popery still, English, which have not the tongue of the people, nor can perform any divine offices or converse with them; and which hold, many of them, two or three, four or more vicarages a-piece. . . . The Lord in mercy look upon His poor Church and this part of it as poor as any;

and my particular diocese poorly furnished of a Bishop—the comfort of whose heart is, God is rich in mercy to all that call upon Him.”

To give any detailed account of Bedell's struggle to right the wrongs here set forth, would be like trying to describe in detail Hercules' battle with the hydra.

A man of peace, desiring to live in charity with all men, his hatred of injustice and oppression forced him into lawsuit after lawsuit, until “he called the law his purgatory.” A scholar to the finger-tips, he let “the spiders take their pleasure in my study amongst my books,” while he wandered in “many a hard, weary journey,” across “mountains and boggy ways and loughs and rivers not passable by boat,” from one end of his diocese to the other.

“The people generally, English, Scottish, Irish, gentle, simple, Protestants, Papists, welcomed him wherever he came. . . . He would not refuse the courtesies of Papists in these occasions, nor of Papist-priests, but sometimes hath taken up his lodging even in such men's houses, and very ambitious would they be of entertaining him as their guest.”

We can picture the fine old man, “tall and graceful in his person,” clad in “a long stuff gown not costly but comely,” with abundant grey hair and long beard, “his eye not dim nor his natural force abated, having never used spectacles nor lost one tooth,” moving amongst rich and poor with the same stately courtesy and winning charm.

His very failures were personal triumphs.

One of his bitterest opponents was a Dr. Cooke, his lay Chancellor, who, whilst acting ostensibly in the Bishop's name, was quite independent of his authority. In the Ecclesiastical Courts, Bedell was constantly striving to undo the evil done by his Chancellor, “both keeping,” as he expressed it, “his own hands clean, and looking as well as he could to the fingers of Mr. Cooke.” A sternly contested lawsuit resulted in a nominal victory for the Chancellor. Yet Bedell's son-in-law tells us how “in the year 1646 I met with Dr. Cooke by chance in London,

who spake as reverently of my Lord of Kilmore as any could do, and said he thought there had not been such a man upon the face of the earth until he tried him. . . . He seemed to me to bemoan his death, and was courteous and respectful to me for his sake."

On the whole, the extent of the Bishop's success—real, tangible success—is no less wonderful than is the resistance with which he had to contend.

From the beginning he had resolutely opposed non-residence and pluralism. In 1633 he set an example by resigning the bishopric of Ardagh, and within a short time he had actually succeeded in inducing the greater proportion of his clergy to follow suit.

His methods of dealing with individuals were a characteristic mixture of gentleness and shrewdness. We are told that he won over one eccentric scholar, who threatened to be a hopeless stumbling-block in the way of reform, by setting him to work on the construction of a universal language!

Then came the problem of how to fill the vacant livings. The Bishop's first test of qualification was an utterly novel one in the eyes of his contemporaries—knowledge of Irish.

"How," he would ask, "though they had St. Paul's gifts, could the ministers do any good unless they had the language of the people?"

Bedell had flung himself into the study of the Irish language with the same zest which had made him master of "Arabic and Chaldee" in his old student days at Emmanuel, and of Italian in Venice. As he had drawn up an English-Italian grammar for Sarpi, so now he compiled an Irish one for the use of his clergy—a unique, episcopal labour, which met with scant sympathy from the authorities. It was said that such practice "crossed with the law"; for were not the Irish "required to learn the English language and use English fashions?" But Bedell rejoined that "those people had souls which ought not to be neglected till they would learn English."

In vain his nearest friends "persuaded him to sit still and

not to strive against the stream." Undaunted by opposition, open or furtive, he held steadily on his way.

Of the greatest of all Bedell's services to his adopted country—the translation of the Old Testament into Irish—there is no space to tell here. How he selected to aid him in the task two "Papist" scholars, both of whom were converted in the course of their labours; how a dead-weight of opposition was brought to bear against the work, hindering and delaying it; how, notwithstanding, it was finished at last and on the brink of publication, when the Rebellion broke out and it seemed as if all was in vain; how, after being lost sight of for years, the MS. was rediscovered, and published in 1685; and how, at this day, it is being circulated by the Irish Society—these things form a romance of history which must be read elsewhere.

Whilst working at this translation Bedell compiled and published a short catechism in Irish and English, with prayers and portions of Scripture "containing the sum of the Gospel," which was read with eagerness even by the priests and friars. "And these things," says his son-in-law, "begot a great interest in the Irish nation, as if he had been the first and only man that ever God sent into Ireland to seek their national good, their spiritual and eternal welfare."

An astonishing number, not only of the peasantry, but of the priests themselves, were won over to the Protestant Church, and from these the Bishop selected ministers for his vacant livings.

In twelve years he had transformed his diocese. In twelve years more, what might he not have accomplished? With a band of fellow-workers, earnest and devoted as himself, he might have changed the whole after-history of Ireland. But from first to last Bedell stood alone, "a voice crying in the wilderness," crying down the centuries of what might have been—nay, surely, of what in the fulness of time is yet to be.

In 1638 his wife's death shattered a home-life which, on the testimony of his chaplain, had been untroubled by "the least jar in word or deed." Three years later came the Irish

Rebellion, "the Babylonish captivity of the land . . . that overturned all."

The iron rule of Lord Strafford had been suddenly withdrawn; change and disquiet were in the air; and in October, 1641, the seething mass of discontent and unrest, which had long been fermenting secretly, boiled over like a witch's caldron.

Throughout Ireland the natives rose simultaneously against their rulers; and the rulers were hopelessly unprepared. A plot for capturing Dublin Castle failed by a hair's-breadth, but in other parts of the country the rising was as successful as it was unexpected. . . Everywhere the English settlers were thrust from their homes, stripped of all, and driven forth—young and old, men, women, and children—like a herd of frightened beasts.

One man only remained entirely unmolested—Bishop Bedell.

"There seemed to be a secret guard set about his house." The rebels told him that, "because he had never done wrong to any, but good to many, they loved and honoured him above all the English that ever came into Ireland, and he should be the last Englishman that should be put out."

As the Rebellion grew in strength, it grew in horror. Band after band of fugitives sought refuge in the Bishop's palace, "like Job's messengers," with stories of increasing terror. Some were almost naked, and the Bishop fetched "all the clothes he had in the world" and gave to them. Soon the house was crowded out, so that numbers were obliged to huddle together in the outbuildings. Then came tidings of ruthless massacres, followed by yet more hideous rumours of unspeakable tortures inflicted upon helpless Protestants; for the cry of "Down with the English!" had changed to "Destroy the heretics!"

Yet the "secret guard" still seemed to surround Bedell's household. In vain the rebel leaders sent threatening messages, commanding him to dismiss the fugitives. The palace was quite incapable of defence, but for a long while no assailants came near it in the daytime, though at night prowling bands of rebels drove off the Bishop's cattle, and sought to frighten away

the "poor English" in the outhouses, stripping them over again and menacing them with drawn skeans.

Some of the fugitives, with touching heroism, chose to leave their refuge "rather than bring any mischief to the Bishop"; but it was known that he refused shelter to none, and fresh numbers came pouring in.

At length the Irish gathered round the palace till those within were virtually imprisoned. But though Bedell could no longer relieve any from outside, his presence was like a talisman protecting those who were with him from violence and even insult.

Once, when a company of armed Irish were "rifling and tearing among the almost naked people" in the outhouses, their cries reached the Bishop, who "would needs go out himself to their rescue," despite the remonstrances of his friends.

Unarmed, but carrying "a long staff handsomely carved and coloured," which had been presented to him by an Irishman, he thrust his way into the midst of the howling rabble. Immediately they "left harassing the poor English" and drew back, but the next instant some of the more violent returned and "presented their muskets right against the Bishop's breast."

The scene stands out like a picture; the wild Irish kernes, drunk with their own outrages, the shrinking, cowering victims, and in the midst the one calm figure like a rock beaten by the surf. Laying his hand on his breast, he bid them shoot there if they chose, but offer no more violence to those who were under his protection. And as if awed by some unseen power, the assailants lowered their muskets and slunk away.

Until December 18 Bedell was suffered to remain at Kilmore, "like a man standing in the breach between the living and the dead." Vainly the rebels offered him a safe-conduct if he would leave the country. He still made answer that he could not desert his post. But at length, urged on by the Roman Catholic Bishop of the diocese, they took possession of the palace, and Bedell and his family became prisoners in name as well as fact.

At their earnest request they were allowed to remain together ; and the whole party were conveyed—not unkindly—to the only place of strength in the neighbourhood, Loughwater Castle, “a tall round tower” standing in the midst of a lake.

In no way was it a deliberately harsh imprisonment ; but the castle was in a ruinous condition, open to rain and snow, and the inevitable hardships and privations must have borne hardly on an old man. Yet, while the spirits of all about him gave way, Bedell remained “cheerful and joyful,” so that “it was no small comfort to all the company to have such a champion.”

How their captivity would end, none could tell. Day by day rumours from the outer world grew darker. It was said that the rebels had resolved to leave no “drop of English blood” in the country ; and though the Bishop’s gaolers still treated him with kindness and even reverence, their attitude might change at any moment.

Long since, when the call to Ireland first reached him, Bedell had responded to it as a soldier to the trumpet call which summons him to danger, perhaps to death, and his heart did not fail now. “To a Christian and a Bishop,” he wrote, “that is now almost seventy, no death for the cause of Christ can be bitter.” And death was very near, yet in no form of terror, but rather as a relieving angel sent to call the weary soldier from the heat of battle.

On January 7, the prisoners were suddenly and unexpectedly released, but to “such a liberty as,” in the words of one of them, “was more dangerous than their former imprisonment.” All around was bloodshed and desolation. The Roman Catholic Bishop had established himself in the palace at Kilmore ; “so that he that was wont to give entertainment to others had now no place to hide his head but at others’ courtesy.”

Bedell found shelter in the house of an Irishman, Denis Sheridan, who, though a Protestant, was protected by powerful kinsmen. Fever broke out amongst the refugees crowded together in his house ; Bedell’s stepson was one of the sufferers,

and the Bishop insisted on taking a share in the nursing, until he, too, was stricken down by the fever.

Enfeebled by all that he had gone through—broken-hearted, some have guessed, by the evil that had come upon the land—the old man had no strength left with which to hold to life. His work was ended—in seeming failure. Shadowed by that failure, in an alien country, surrounded by enemies, he lay down to die.

And yet the story of those last days moves us less by its tragedy than by its tenderness, as if while we gazed upon a dark cloud-bank the sun should shine through, transfiguring the gloom into glory.

“In an alien country, surrounded by enemies.” Say, rather, in a land which he had made his own by eternal conquest, surrounded by lovers.

His son tells us how, a little before the end, there came into his chamber one “that bore a great affection to him, and yet a zealous Papist.” And “after some few words” (which he hardly could utter for tears) “he besought the Bishop, if he wanted money, or any other necessaries, to make use of anything that he was able to furnish him withal. To which the Bishop, rising up out of his chair, made return, thanking him . . . desiring God to requite him . . . and to restore peace to the nation, being hardly able to stand, and yet beyond expectation expressing himself without any faltering in his speech, which he had not done for a great while before.

“After this he seldom spoke, and but brokenly. Yet, being asked how he did, his answer was still ‘*Well.*’”

At the last his sons stood by the bed weeping, and “on a sudden looking up, even when death was already in his eyes, he spake unto them thus: ‘Be of good cheer, be of good cheer—whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.’ And these were his last words.”

He had wished to be laid to rest beside his wife, in the shadow of Kilmore Cathedral. At first the priest in possession refused to allow a heretic to be buried in consecrated ground.

But in this one thing the Irish, good Catholics though they were, "would have their wills," and, overborne by his own followers, he yielded. So the little band of mourners made their way to the churchyard in strange company, for "the chief of the rebels assembled their forces together," and "would needs accompany him to his grave, not without some kind of pomp . . . Some of the principal of them would needs be the bearers . . . And so, commanding the drum to beat, as the manner is when a soldier is buried, and placing the musqueteers before the corpse, they thus conveyed the Bishop to his grave. And being come thither, the Sheriff told the Bishop's sons that they might use what prayers or what form of burial they pleased; none should interrupt them."

With timid caution—not unnatural, perhaps, under the circumstances, yet strangely at variance with Bedell's own fearlessness—the Protestant mourners refused to take advantage of this permission, "judging it neither needful nor prudent to attempt such a hazardous . . . office at such a time."

The prayers which went up round the grave of the greatest Irish Bishop broke from the lips, not of his fellow-Churchmen, but of those "other sheep" whom for fifteen years he had loved and yearned over.

"May my soul," exclaimed a priest who stood by, "be with Bedell's!" And from other voices there rose a cry, "Rest in peace; the last of the English!"

Over the grave they fired a military salute. And surely it was a fitting burial for him who had battled so long and valiantly with the Powers of Evil.

St. Michael's warrior had won his rest at last.

LILIAN DALTON.

