

EDGAR

THIS PRINCE, who mounted the throne in such early youth, soon discovered an excellent capacity in the administration of affairs; and his reign is one of the most fortunate that we meet with in the ancient English history. He showed no aversion to war; he made the wisest preparations against invaders: And by this vigour and foresight, he was enabled, without any danger of suffering insults, to indulge his inclination towards peace, and to employ himself in supporting and improving the internal government of his kingdom. He maintained a body of disciplined troops; which he quartered in the north, in order to keep the mutinous Northumbrians in subjection, and to repel the inroads of the Scots. He built and supported a powerful navy;^z and that he might retain the seamen in the practice of their duty, and always present a formidable armament to his enemies, he stationed three squadrons off the coast, and ordered them to make, from time to time, the circuit of his dominions.^[NOTE IC] The foreign Danes dared not to approach a country which appeared in such a posture of defence: The domestic Danes saw inevitable destruction to be the consequence of their tumults and insurrections: The neighbouring sovereigns, the king of Scotland, the princes of Wales, of the Isle of Man, of the Orkneys and even of Ireland,^a were reduced to pay submission to so formidable a monarch. He carried his superiority to a great height, and might have excited an universal combination against him, had not his power been so well established, as to deprive his enemies of all hopes of shaking it. It is said, that, residing once at Chester, and having purposed to go by water to the abbey of St. John the Baptist, he obliged eight of his tributary princes to row him in a barge upon the Dee.^b The English historians are fond of mentioning the name of Kenneth III, king of Scots among the number: The Scottish historians either deny the fact, or assert, that their king, if ever he acknowledged himself a vassal to Edgar, did him homage, not for his crown, but for the dominions which he held in England.

But the chief means, by which Edgar maintained his authority, and preserved public peace, was the paying of court to Dunstan and the monks, who had at first placed him on the throne, and who, by their pretensions to superior sanctity and purity of manners, had acquired an ascendant over the people. He favoured their scheme for dispossessing the secular canons of all the monasteries;^c he bestowed preferment on none but their partizans; he allowed Dunstan to resign the see of Worcester into the hand of Oswald, one of his creatures,^d and to place Ethelwold, another of them, in that of Winchester;^e he consulted these prelates in the administration of all ecclesiastical, and even in that of many civil affairs; and though the vigour of his own genius prevented him from being implicitly guided by them, the king and the bishops found such

advantages in their mutual agreement, that they always acted in concert, and united their influence in preserving the peace and tranquillity of the kingdom.

In order to compleat the great work of placing the new order of monks in all the convents, Edgar summoned a general council of the prelates and the heads of the religious orders. He here inveighed against the dissolute lives of the secular clergy; the smallness of their tonsure, which, it is probable, maintained no longer any resemblance to the crown of thorns; their negligence in attending the exercise of their function; their mixing with the laity in the pleasures of gaming, hunting, dancing, and singing; and their openly living with concubines, by which it is commonly supposed he meant their wives. He then turned himself to Dunstan the primate; and in the name of king Edred, whom he supposed to look down from heaven with indignation against all those enormities, he thus addressed him.

"It is you, Dunstan, by whose advice I founded monasteries, built churches, and expended my treasure in the support of religion and religious houses. You were my counsellor and assistant in all my schemes: You were the director of my conscience: To you I was obedient in all things. When did you call for supplies, which I refused you? Was my assistance ever wanting to the poor? Did I deny support and establishments to the clergy and the convents? Did I not hearken to your instructions, who told me, that these charities were, of all others, the most grateful to my Maker, and fixed a perpetual fund for the support of religion? And are all our pious endeavours now frustrated by the dissolute lives of the priests? Not that I throw any blame on you: You have reasoned, besought, inculcated, inveighed: But it now behoves you to use sharper and more vigorous remedies; and conjoining your spiritual authority with the civil power, to purge effectually the temple of God from thieves and intruders."^f

It is easy to imagine, that this harangue had the desired effect: and that, when the king and prelates thus concurred with the popular prejudices, it was not long before the monks prevailed, and established their new discipline in almost all the convents.

We may remark, that the declamations against the secular clergy are, both here and in all the historians, conveyed in general terms; and as that order of men are commonly restrained by the decency of their character, it is difficult to believe, that the complaints against their dissolute manners could be so universally just as is pretended. It is more probable, that the monks paid court to the populace by an affected austerity of life; and, representing the most innocent liberties, taken by the other clergy, as great and unpardonable enormities, thereby prepared the way for the encrease of their own power and influence. Edgar, however, like a true politician, concurred with the prevailing party; and he even indulged them in pretensions, which, though they might, when complied with, engage the monks to support royal authority during his own reign, proved afterwards dangerous to his successors, and gave disturbance to the whole civil power. He seconded the policy of the court of Rome, in granting to some monasteries an exemption from episcopal jurisdiction: He allowed the convents, even those of royal foundation, to usurp the election of their own abbot: and he admitted their forgeries of ancient charters, by which, from the pretended grant of former kings, they assumed many privileges and immunities.^a

These merits of Edgar have procured him the highest panegyrics from the monks; and he is transmitted to us not only under the character of a consummate statesman and an active prince, praises to which he seems to have been justly entitled, but under that of a great saint and a man of virtue. But nothing could more betray both his hypocrisy in inveighing against the licentiousness of the secular clergy, and the interested spirit of his partizans, in bestowing such eulogies on his piety, than the usual tenor of his conduct, which was licentious to the highest degree, and violated every law, human and divine. Yet those very monks, who, as we are told by Ingulf, a very ancient historian, had no idea of any moral or religious merit, except chastity and obedience, not only connived at his enormities, but loaded him with the greatest praises.

History, however, has preserved some instance of his amours, from which, as from a specimen, we may form a conjecture of the rest.

Edgar broke into a convent, carried off Editha, a nun, by force, and even committed violence on her person.^b For this act of

sacrilege he was reprimanded by Dunstan; and that he might reconcile himself to the church, he was obliged, not to separate from his mistress, but to abstain from wearing his crown during seven years, and to deprive himself so long of that vain ornament.ⁱ A punishment very unequal to that which had been inflicted on the unfortunate Edwy, who, for a marriage, which, in the strictest sense, could only deserve the name of irregular, was expelled his kingdom, saw his queen treated with singular barbarity, was loaded with calumnies, and has been represented to us under the most odious colours. Such is the ascendant which may be attained, by hypocrisy and cabal, over mankind!

There was another mistress of Edgar's, with whom he first formed a connexion by a kind of accident. Passing one day by Andover, he lodged in the house of a nobleman, whose daughter, being endowed with all the graces of person and behaviour, enflamed him at first sight with the highest desire; and he resolved by any expedient to gratify it. As he had not leisure to employ courtship or address for attaining his purpose, he went directly to her mother, declared the violence of his passion, and desired that the young lady might be allowed to pass that very night with him. The mother was a woman of virtue, and determined not to dishonour her daughter and her family by compliance; but being well acquainted with the impetuosity of the king's temper, she thought it would be easier, as well as safer, to deceive, than refuse him. She feigned therefore a submission to his will; but secretly ordered a waiting-maid, of no disagreeable figure, to steal into the king's bed, after all the company should be retired to rest. In the morning, before day-break, the damsel, agreeably to the injunctions of her mistress, offered to retire; but Edgar, who had no reserve in his pleasures, and whose love to his bedfellow was rather enflamed by enjoyment, refused his consent, and employed force and entreaties to detain her. Elfreda (for that was the name of the maid) trusting to her own charms, and to the love with which, she hoped, she had now inspired the king, made probably but a faint resistance; and the return of light discovered the deceit to Edgar. He had passed a night so much to his satisfaction, that he expressed no displeasure with the old lady on account of her fraud; his love was transferred to Elfreda; she became his favourite mistress; and maintained her ascendant over him, till his marriage with Elfrida.^k

The circumstances of his marriage with this lady were more singular, and more criminal. Elfrida was daughter and heir of Olgar, earl of Devonshire; and though she had been educated in the country, and had never appeared at court, she had filled all England with the reputation of her beauty. Edgar himself, who was indifferent to no accounts of this nature, found his curiosity excited by the frequent panegyrics which he heard of Elfrida; and reflecting on her noble birth, he resolved, if he

found her charms answerable to their fame, to obtain possession of her on honourable terms. He communicated his intention to earl Athelwold, his favourite; but used the precaution, before he made any advances to her parents, to order that nobleman, on some pretence, to pay them a visit, and to bring him a certain account of the beauty of their daughter. Athelwold, when introduced to the young lady, found general report to have fallen short of the truth; and being actuated by the most vehement love, he determined to sacrifice to this new passion his fidelity to his master, and to the trust reposed in him. He returned to Edgar, and told him, that the riches alone, and high quality of Elfrida, had been the ground of the admiration paid her, and that her charms, far from being any wise extraordinary, would have been overlooked in a woman of inferior station. When he had, by this deceit, diverted the king from his purpose, he took an opportunity after some interval, of turning again the conversation on Elfrida: He remarked, that, though the parentage and fortune of the lady had not produced on him, as on others, any illusion with regard to her beauty, he could not forbear reflecting, that she would on the whole be an advantageous match for him, and might, by her birth and riches, make him sufficient compensation for the homeliness of her person. If the king, therefore, gave his approbation, he was determined to make proposals in his own behalf to the earl of Devonshire, and doubted not to obtain his, as well as the young lady's consent to the marriage. Edgar, pleased with an expedient for establishing his favourite's fortune, not only exhorted him to execute his purpose, but forwarded his success by his recommendations to the parents of Elfrida; and Athelwold was soon made happy in the possession of his mistress. Dreading, however, the detection of the artifice, he employed every pretence of detaining Elfrida in the country, and for keeping her at a distance from Edgar.

The violent passion of Athelwold had rendered him blind to the necessary consequences, which must attend his conduct, and the advantages, which the numerous enemies, that always pursue a royal favourite, would, by its means, be able to make against him. Edgar was soon informed of the truth; but before he would execute vengeance on Athelwold's treachery, he resolved to satisfy himself with his own eyes of the certainty and full extent of his guilt. He told him, that he intended to pay him a visit in his castle, and be introduced to the acquaintance of his new-married wife; and Athelwold, as he could not refuse the honour, only craved leave to go before him a few hours, that he might the better prepare every thing for his reception. He then discovered the whole matter to Elfrida; and begged her, if she had any regard, either to her own honour or his life, to conceal from Edgar, by every circumstance of dress and behaviour, that fatal beauty, which had seduced him from fidelity to his friend, and had betrayed him into so many falsehoods. Elfrida promised compliance,

though nothing was farther from her intentions. She deemed herself little beholden to Athelwold for a passion, which had deprived her of a crown; and knowing the force of her own charms, she did not despair even yet of reaching that dignity, of which her husband's artifice had bereaved her. She appeared before the king with all the advantages, which the richest attire, and the most engaging airs could bestow upon her, and she excited at once in his bosom the highest love towards herself, and the most furious desire of revenge against her husband. He knew, however, to dissemble these passions; and seducing Athelwold into a wood, on pretence of hunting, he stabbed him with his own hand, and soon after publicly espoused Elfrida.^l

Before we conclude our account of this reign, we must mention two circumstances, which are remarked by historians. The reputation of Edgar allured a great number of foreigners to visit his court; and he gave them encouragement to settle in England.^m We are told, that they imported all the vices of their respective countries, and contributed to corrupt the simple manners of the natives:ⁿ But as this simplicity of manners, so highly and often so injudiciously extolled, did not preserve them from barbarity and treachery, the greatest of all vices, and the most incident to a rude uncultivated people, we ought perhaps to deem their acquaintance with foreigners rather an advantage; as it tended to enlarge their views, and to cure them of those illiberal prejudices and rustic manners, to which islanders are often subject.

Another remarkable incident of this reign was the extirpation of wolves from England. This advantage was attained by the industrious policy of Edgar. He took great pains in hunting and pursuing those ravenous animals; and when he found, that all that escaped him had taken shelter in the mountains and forests of Wales, he changed the tribute of money imposed on the Welsh princes by Athelstan, his predecessor,^o into an annual tribute of three hundred heads of wolves; which produced such diligence in hunting them, that the animal has been no more seen in this island.

Edgar died, after a reign of sixteen years, and in the thirty-third of his age. He was succeeded by Edward, whom he had by his first marriage with the daughter of earl Ordmer.