

## CHAPTER V.

STEPHEN, Earl of Blois, a favorite nephew of Henry I., crossed over to England and marched to London, where, on December 2, 1135, amid the clamor of the populace, and through the influence of a few nobles, he was declared king, and on Thursday, December 26, was duly crowned. Henry I. had, before his death, exacted a promise from his nobles and ecclesiastics that they would, upon his death, acknowledge his daughter Matilda, queen. Stephen knew of this quite well, and was also aware that he was a usurper, and had no real right to the throne. He had the influence of his brother, the Bishop of Winchester, to back him, and he was popular with the people. "He was a man of activity, of good mind in attempting works of difficulty; mild and compassionate to his enemies, and affable to all."<sup>1</sup> These

<sup>1</sup> Malsbury, 491.

traits won him popularity and the crown; but he feared that without more it would not secure him his consecration, nor settle him firmly upon the throne. He therefore thought best to appease the church with fair promises. He was crowned king at Westminster by William, Archbishop of Canterbury, Thursday, December 26, 1135, and thereupon issued as his coronation oath what would in reality, had it been given under different circumstances and form, have amounted to almost a charter of liberties. This is the oath he took upon that occasion:

"I, Stephen, by the grace of God, and by  
"consent of the clergy and people, King  
"of England, and consecrated by William,  
"Archbishop of Canterbury, and Legate of  
"the Holy Roman Church; and afterward  
"confirmed by Innocent, Pontiff of the Holy  
"Roman See, do hereby grant, in respect and  
"love of God, that the Holy Church shall be  
"free; and I confirm all reverence due to it.  
"I promise to act nothing in the Church, nor  
"in ecclesiastical affairs, simoniacally, nor

" will I permit it to be done. I defend and  
" confirm that the power, justice and digni-  
" ties of ecclesiastical persons and all clerks,  
" and the distribution of their goods, shall be  
" in the hands of the Bishops. I grant and  
" establish that the dignities of Churches con-  
" firmed by their privileges and the customs  
" held by ancient tenure, shall remain invio-  
" lable. All the possessions and tenures of  
" Churches which they held on that day,  
" when King William, my grandfather, was  
" alive and dead, I grant to be free and abso-  
" lute to them, without any false reclamation :  
" but if the Church shall hereafter claim any  
" of those things which were possessed or  
" enjoyed before the death of the King, and  
" which it now may want, I reserve that to  
" my indulgence and dispensation, to be either  
" discussed or restored. But whatsoever hath  
" been bestowed upon it since the King's  
" death, either by the liberality of the King,  
" or the gift of great persons, or the oblation,  
" purchase, or any exchange, of faithful men,  
" I confirm, and shall be conferred upon them.

"I promise to preserve peace and justice in  
"all things to the utmost of my power. The  
"forests which William, my grandfather, and  
"William my uncle, have made and held, I  
"reserve to myself: but all the rest, which  
"King Henry hath superadded, I restore, and  
"grant, quit and discharged to the churches  
"and the kingdom. If any Bishop or Abbot  
"or other ecclesiastical person, shall reason-  
"ably distribute his goods before his death,  
"or appoint them to be so distributed, I grant  
"that it shall remain firm: But if he be pre-  
"vented by death, distribution of them shall  
"be made by consent of his church for the  
"good of his soul. Whilst episcopal sees  
"shall remain vacant of pastors, both they  
"and all their possessions, shall be committed  
"to the power and keeping of clerks, or other  
"honest men of the same church, until a pas-  
"tor shall be canonically substituted. All ex-  
"actions, injustice, and miskennings, wick-  
"edly introduced either by sheriffs, or by any  
"others, I totally abolish. The good and an-  
"cient laws and just customs in murders,

"pleas, and other causes I will observe, and  
"do hereby establish and command to be ob-  
served. But all this I grant, saving my  
"royalty and just dignity."<sup>1</sup>

Upon this occasion the oaths that the Bishops took is also decidedly extraordinary. They did not, as was their former custom, swear perpetual allegiance to the king, but only so long as he should maintain the privileges of the Church.

This coronation oath was witnessed by very many nobles and people. So very many, in fact, that William of Malmsbury tells us that it would be wearisome to repeat their names.

This unusual departure was one more step in the direction of the freedom of the people. It was at least a promise from a king of more than had as yet been obtained since the time of William the Conqueror. With each succeeding king it becomes interesting to note the additional promises they make and then never carry out. But they all seem to have

<sup>1</sup> Malmsbury, 493; Thomson, 406.

recognized that the people desired certain privileges, and it seems very strange in many ways that those kings did not give them more than they did, particularly in those ways which would have gained them strength and honor, without in the least relinquishing any kingly prerogative. Stephen was "kind as far as promises went, but sure to disappoint in its truth and execution."<sup>1</sup>

About his first act of bad faith was in completely ignoring the terms of his coronation oath. William, Archbishop of Canterbury, died within the first year of his reign, and Stephen should have consented to an election to fill the office immediately, or within a reasonable time. Instead of doing so, however, or of showing any disposition to wait till he could find a suitable incumbent, he immediately dispelled all doubt in the matter by seizing upon the property and all the revenues of the see as the rights of the crown. This act startled the barons. Not that they were particularly religious or

<sup>1</sup> Malmesbury, 491; Wendover, 1-484.

cared especially to guard as inviolate all laws pertaining to the Church, but they concluded that if Stephen was so treacherous to his first oath concerning the Church, he would prove likewise to them. They revolted, and thus started the riots and discords continuing for many years during his reign. For it is true that "the kingdom was a prey to intestinal wars, slaughter, fire and rapine,"<sup>1</sup> and that ruin was "spread throughout the land, and cries of distress, horror, and woe rose in every quarter."<sup>2</sup> In fact Stephen's whole reign was one of turbulence and trouble, for he "grievously oppressed the people."<sup>3</sup>

The forest laws, which had been a particularly objectionable feature of Henry's reign, were not in any manner enforced by Stephen. He particularly said in his coronation oath, that he would make restitution of such of those forests as had been usurped by Henry. He expected this piece of favoritism to enure

<sup>1</sup> Huntingdon, 273.

<sup>2</sup> Huntingdon, 273.

<sup>3</sup> Gesta Stephani, 400.

to his advantage and popularity, but he did not know its cost. He allowed the people to run riot. They almost exterminated the animals from the forests. "It was wonderful how so many myriads of wild animals, which in large herds, before plentifully stocked the country, suddenly disappeared, so that out of the vast number scarcely two now could be found together. They seemed to be entirely extirpated."<sup>1</sup>

The people also robbed and plundered each other at will. There was absolutely no enforcement of law. Things in general were allowed to go to ruin for want of a strong and ruling hand. "Thenceforth England, before the resting place of right, the habitation of peace, and the mirror of piety, was converted into an abode of malignity, a theatre of strife, and a school of rebellion."<sup>2</sup> Famine also came in to play its share in the misrule and horror. "Food being scarce, there was a dreadful famine throughout England; some of the people disgust-

<sup>1</sup> Gesta Stephani, 324.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.



ingly devoured the flesh of dogs and horses. Others appeased their insatiable appetites with the garbage and uncooked herbs and roots: many in all parts sunk under the severity of the famine and died in heaps."<sup>1</sup>

Henry's reign was maintained through fear and terror. He instituted laws and enforced them. His courts of justice were good and respected, and it seems wonderful, merely by the change of a ruler, that in such a short time this reign, which was upheld through strength, could give way to one of mere anarchy and civil war, caused entirely by weakness. The times were not in themselves responsible for this condition. It was Stephen. He was a soldier, and a brave one, but he lacked the mental strength to govern. The awful but wholesome examples of disobedience that his immediate predecessors had made was discontinued during his time. There was none of that terrible cruelty and horrible execution that was started by the Conqueror. William I. evidently knew how

<sup>1</sup> Gesta Stephani, 400.

to enforce obedience according to the times in which he reigned, his only error, and that of his successors, being the excess to which they carried it. Stephen was too mild,—he was unfitted. "This easy man must pardon me for speaking the truth; who, had he entered on the sovereignty lawfully, and not given a ready ear to the insinuations of the malevolent in the administration of it, would have wanted little in any princely quality. Under him, therefore, the treasures of several churches were pillaged and their landed possessions given to laymen; the churches of the clergy were sold to foreigners, the bishops made captive or forced to alienate their property; the abbies given to improper persons, either through the influence of friendship, or for the discharge of debts."<sup>1</sup>

His, reign through its many vacillations and trials, lasted nineteen years, and is unique in the history of England. The people were oppressed continually, but in forms vastly different from those previously

<sup>1</sup> Malmsbury, 495.

in vogue. They were taxed heavily, but not to the extent that William burdened them. They were oppressed more from civil war and its necessary consequences. During all his reign, with the exception of the first two years, the country was continually in a state of fight. The peace of Henry had sadly departed, and the trying and troublous times of Stephen commenced and continued while he lived. He was unfitted in every way to rule, and his death brought an end to the misery and suffering.