

NICHOLAS OF KENTON.

BY FRANCIS SEYMOUR STEVENSON.

Most of our information with regard to Nicholas of Kenton, whom Sixtus of Siena calls Nicholas of Chenton, is derived from Bale's *Heliades* (Harl. ms. 3838, ff. 91a, 92b); and from his *Scriptorum Illustrum Majoris Britanniae Catalogus*, the first edition of which was printed at Ipswich by John Overton in 1548. The information thus obtained is supplemented, and on essential points confirmed by Pits and Leland, and by the entries quoted in Villiers de St. Etienne's *Bibliotheca Carmelitana*, Vol. II., pp. 499—501. Although Bale's record has not the force of contemporary authority, it must be remembered that he was born within thirty-seven years of Nicholas of Kenton's death, that he was himself a Carmelite and had access to all the Carmelite documents then extant, that he was a Suffolk man, and that (at any rate before the appearance of the 1557 Basel edition of his *Catalogus*, and probably at a much earlier date), he had become the intimate friend of John Parkhurst, subsequently Bishop of Norwich, whose wife was Margaret, daughter of Thomas Garneys, of Kenton Hall. It will, therefore, be admitted that Bale had exceptional opportunities for the acquisition of correct information on the subject.

The date of Nicholas of Kenton's birth is unknown, and it is not certain whether he was or was not a member of the Kenton family to whom Kenton Hall at one time belonged. He was born, however, at Kenton; *in oppidulo sui cognominis. decem a Gippesvico passuum millibus*, studied the rudiments of letters at the Carmelite convent at Ipswich, where he also joined the Order, pursued his subsequent studies at Cambridge, where he became Doctor in Theology, and travelled through various parts of the

kingdom in pursuit of knowledge. On the 2nd of March, 1419, whilst residing at White Friars, London, he was ordained a sub-deacon, and, on the 1st December, 1420, a priest. He is described as one of the foremost rhetoricians, poets, philosophers, and theologians of his generation. At a time when written sermons were in vogue, he was conspicuous by his gift of extemporary preaching. In 1444, at a Council held at Stamford, he was elected Provincial of the Carmelites in England, being twenty-fifth in succession. About two years later he was confronted with the attacks directed by Philip Norris and others against the Friars generally and more particularly against the Carmelite organisation; and his period of office synchronized with the movement, which received its most powerful impulse at Mantua, and had its counterpart in France, in favour of a revision of the rule of the Order, with the result that the Carmelites divided themselves into rival sections, one of which took the name of "Reformed Carmelites."

Nicholas of Kenton, who appears to have kept in touch with the phases of the movement—we hear of him at Chalons sur Saône in 1444, and at Lyons in 1451—was in favour of the maintenance of the existing statutes, and against the innovations, mainly of discipline, but partly also of doctrine, which were then advocated; and he addressed to the General of the Order a letter which is variously described as *contra reformationem* or *contra quosdam reformatos*. It is probable that the letters he addressed to the Cardinal Archbishop of York (the John Kemp of whom it was said that, *Bis Primas, ter Praesul erat, bis Cardine functus*), to the Duke of Norfolk, to David Cherbery the Carmelite, and *contra quosdam apostatas*, relate to the same controversies. In spite of all troubles the Order remained in a flourishing condition during his tenure of office, and when, at the end of twelve years, he applied, "by reason of declining years and desire for retirement and contemplation," for relief from the burden of his duties, he was able to state that more than 1,500

brethren were at that time under his rule—a number which diminished rapidly within the next few years. His request that he might be allowed to resign his office was granted in 1456, John Milverton was appointed his successor, and Nicholas thenceforward lived in retirement at White Friars, London, until his death, which occurred on the 4th of September, 1468, in the reign of Edward IV. (Leland by mistake gives 1460 as the date). In his petition of 1456 Nicholas had stated *se jam malle precibus et Deo libere vacare quam praxi attendere, parere potius deinceps velle quam præesse*; and it is not surprising to find it recorded that he died *egregia sanctimonix et doctrinx laude*.

Weever, in his *Funeral Monuments*, quotes the epitaph inscribed on his tomb—

“Kenton Doctoris Carmilite Nicolai
Sic peccatricis anime miserans Adonai
Carmeli gentis curam qui rexit in Anglis
Ipse bis senis fungens summus Prior annis.
Huic sibi propitius veniam præstet Pater almus,
Cujus spiramen scandens supra astra sit. Amen.”

Apart from a couple of sentences in Harl. ms. 1819, described as *ex scriptis Nicholai Kenton, de numero Fratrum Carmelitarum in Anglia*, it is doubtful whether any of his numerous writings have been preserved. He wrote a Life of St. Cyril the Greek, commencing with the words *Gesta sanctorum patrum quorum . . .* It is open to question whether the biographer of St. Andrew of Fiesole in the *Acta Sanctorum*, under the date of January 30th, is correct in his identification of an anonymous Life of St. Cyril and certain other works in the possession of his community (*penes nos*) with the writings ascribed to Nicholas of Kenton; but, as the discussion of their authenticity is postponed to the biography of St. Cyril, under the head of the 18th of March, and no such discussion is found there, it is impossible to form an opinion as to the grounds of the Bollandist view. We have, however, Bale's list of Nicholas of Kenton's works. They

include, in addition to the Life of St. Cyril and to the letters previously mentioned, "Propositions to the Clergy," "Theological Theses," twelve "Capitular Addresses to the Carmelite Brethren," forty-eight "Sermons on the Gospels," "Lessons on the Song of Songs," a collection of 212 letters to various correspondents, an "Address to the Clergy of Cambridge," a "Letter to the Bishop of Exeter," and sundry treatises on specific points of religious doctrine and practice, of all of which the titles and opening words alone remain. He also composed a poetic invocation, described variously as *Precamina Divorum*, *Præcationes ad Sanctos* or *Carmen Votivum*, addressed to St. Albert—presumably the earlier St. Albert who was Bishop of Vercelli and Patriarch of Jerusalem at the beginning of the thirteenth century, and formulated the rule of the Carmelite Order, and not the later St. Albert of Trapano, also connected with the Carmelites—and to St. Andrew, Bishop of Fiesole in the fourteenth century, who, although not canonized until 1628, was treated as such by many besides the Carmelites at a much earlier date, and whose repute was then at its height owing to the benefit said to have been derived by the Florentines from the invocation of his aid at the battle of Anghiari in 1440. The respect felt by Nicholas of Kenton for St. Andrew of Fiesole is embodied in the legend, cited by the Bollandists (Jan. 30th), that he was cured of a fever by fixing his thoughts intently on that saint, after touching his image with his hand.

Although the history of the Carmelites in England does not present the deep interest which attaches to that of the Franciscans, or even to that of the Dominicans, in this country, and does not exhibit the same array of eminent names, it will be readily granted that in Nicholas of Kenton they found a head who occupies a distinguished place alike in their annals and in the life and thought of the fifteenth century.

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