Pope Leo XIII.

A CHARACTER STUDY.

(By Justin McCarthy, M.P.)

Pope Leo XIII. is the last survivor of the great European statesmen of the century. During recent years Gladstone, Bismarck and Pope Leo stood high above all other living statesmen of Europe. A little farther back we come to such men as Count Cavour and Thiers and Guizot; farther back still to such men as Canning, and then we are among the great names that belong to the earlier part of the century. In recent years, however, Gladstone, Bismarck and Pope Leo stood alone, and now the last of the great trio is nearing his end.

I desire to judge Leo XIII. only as a statesman, and not as an ecclesiastic.

The inspiration of his whole career may be described as a passion of philanthropy, to adopt the words which Gladstone in my own hearing applied to Daniel O'Connell: "To improve the condition of the toiling classes all over the world, to mitigate the troubles of the overtasked, to abolish slavery in every form, white and black; to lighten the load of the heavily laden, to spread the gospel of peace among all nations." These were the great purposes of Leo's career. It is doing no more than bare justice to the motives which seem always to have guided him when we say that his ambition was to make the life of the pontiff a practical illustration of peace, goodwill and moral and intellectual advancement among men.

Leo came to the throne of the papacy at a time when the worldly foundations of that throne seemed to be hopelessly shaken. The Pope has had no temporal sovereignty left to him, and it must be owned that the sympathy of the civilised world went for the most part with that united Italy to whose political union the papacy owed the loss of its temporal possessions. Leo's predecessor, Pius IX., was a man of pure and exalted purpose but he was almost altogether an ecclesiastic, and he had few of the qualities of a statesman. He was not a man endowed with the peculiar capacity which might have enabled him to regain for the papacy that influence which the arising of new conditions and the spread of new ideas seemed at the time to have taken from it forever. Leo XIII. appears to have from the beginning of his rule made up his mind that the position of the papacy was only to be recovered by a mastery of the new ideas and an acceptance as far as possible of the new conditions. The Pope has been a student from his earliest years. There is a distinct suffusion of the poetic in his nature, which has found expression, indeed, in the composition of many fine pieces of poetry, especially in Latin, but also has given him that which has been of a far greater importance to his career—that quality of dramatic instinct which enables a man to enter into the nature and feelings of other men, and without which there can be no really creative statesmanship.

The Pope has seen a good deal of life outside the papal city. He has been papal nuncio at Brussels, where he had the opportunity of conversing with statesmen from all countries. He visited Paris. He visited London, and was presented to Queen Victoria. He seems to have very soon made up his mind that not much was to be gained for the influence of the papacy by its setting itself into active antagonism with what might have been called the revolutionary forces, which, according to the pessimistic views of many of his fellow-churchmen, had taken possession of all the cabinets of Europe. When he became Pope he set about what he conceived to be the work of the papacy, just as if nothing had happened to interfere with its progress. He resolved, apparently, to make the papacy an example to the Christian world instead of wasting his strength and his influence by trying to contend against the physical conditions, which had left to the Pope but the Vatican and its gardens as his worldly domain. Of course he surrendered nothing of the claims of the papacy, and he refused, as his predecessor had done, to recognise the King of Italy's title to the ownership of Rome. But he spent little of his time in futile efforts to resist the physical mastery of the new conditions, and he made it his task above all things to prove that the moral influence of the papacy was not to be circumscribed by the limitations of the Pope's earthly possessions. It must be owned that during his time the progress made by United Italy has not altogether satisfied the hopes of all those who rejoiced over the expulsion of the Austrians, and the Bourbons, and the abolition of the petty sovereignties and the union of Italy under one Crown. Italy has her destiny yet to make, but for the present we have to see in her a country terribly overtaxed with a population crushed to an almost unexampled degree by the expenditure necessary to convert Italy into the semblance of a great European Power.

Pope Leo has seemed to say to all the world: "My business in life is the welfare of humanity. I am the apostle of peace and universal brotherhood. I offer my mediation as an agent of peace and brotherhood in all quarrels where the disputants are willing to receive my counsel and my help." He has had some hard battles to fight, and for all his sweet, genial and pacific nature he has fought out his battles to the end where compromise did not seem possible, and by his principle of passive resistance he has generally contrived to come off victorious. All the world looked on with interest while he battled for what he believed to be the cause of religious liberty against no less an antagonist than Prince Bismarck, the greatest statesman then living on the European Continent. Bismarck had loudly proclaimed that whatever else he and his colleagues might do they "would not go to Canossa," alluding to the famous castle where Henry IV. of Germany submitted to the penance imposed on him by Gregory VII. But, though Bismarck certainly did not go to Canossa, he was undoubtedly not the victor in the great Kulturkampf, or education battle, which was waged between him and Pope Leo XIII. It is perhaps only fair to say that the heart of the old Emperor William, Bismarck's master, was never thoroughly with his great minister in this attempt to make the authority of the State overrule the dictates of private conscience. The arbitration of Pope Leo has been accepted more than once by disputing States which acknowledged no supremacy on the part of the Pope, but that given to him by moral influence of his authority and his character.

Leo has strongly recommended in several momentous instances the recognition of established facts in the progress of nations. For example, he recognised the French republic as the established system in France and used the whole force of his authority to induce French Catholics to accept the republican form of government and to make the best of it. He takes the closest and most active interest in all institutions to whatever country they belong, which have anything to do with the true organisation of labour and which tends to promote the education, the moral improvement, the personal independence and the domestic comfort of the workingman. His was the first voice raised in cordial response to the appeal of the Czar for a conference of European States to bring about a cessation in the increase of armaments and to establish some basis for international arbitration and an end to the reign of war. The Pope has become so popular among certain influential classes of English Protestants that at one time it seemed to many not altogether impossible that some terms of compromise might be found between the Papacy and the Established Church of England. The Pope, however, could not compromise; Lord Halifax and his English colleagues could not venture to stretch their idea of compromise too far, and so the world went on revolving upon its own axis just as before.

Pope Leo always watches with a close and attentive eye every movement—political, social and religious—that takes place in America. He has the fullest and deepest sympathy with the peaceful progress of the republic, and is especially proud of the position which civic equality and religious freedom has enabled his coreligionists to take in the United States. Some of Pope Leo's recent days have been occupied in the consideration of certain tendencies which had been represented to him as making themselves apparent in American Catholicism—tendencies which some of his advisors believed to indicate a growing form of religious independence not unlike that which is set down as Gallicism in Europe.

It is impossible for any impartial reader not to sympathise with the spirit which pervades the Pope's encyclical issued in last August—a protest against the extraordinary suppression of Catholic associations carried on by the Italian Government. These suppressions, it will be remembered, took place after the riots which had lately broken out throughout almost all Italy, riots which impartial observers for the most part believed to have been caused by the pressure of famine, the famine itself coming in great measure from the overtaxation which the expenditure on the army and navy had brought about. The Italian Government thought fit to see in these riots the evidence of a Papal conspiracy against the monarchy, and it therefore suppressed, by wholesale decree, more than 1000 Catholic associations which were for the most part purely social, economic or religious in their objects.

It is likely enough that the riots were at least in part promoted by republican, socialist, and anarchistic agitators; but, as everybody knows, Pope Leo has always used his influence for the discouragement of socialism and anarchism in their various forms, and while he recognised the French republic just as he did the American republic and the republic of Switzerland, he can hardly be suspected of any designs for the setting up of a republic in Italy.