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AUTOGRAPH LETTER OF WILLIAM OF WYKEHAM.

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THE very curious Letter of which a facsimile is subjoined is an autograph of William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester, to John Lord Cobham. It has no date, but from its contents, coupled with other evidences, was written either in the last days of the year 1366, when Cobham was sent on a special mission to the Duke of Bourbon, or more probably in June, 1367, when he was sent on a subsequent mission to the Pope.

It is curious, not only from its antiquity, but also as confirming a portion of the narrative of Froissart with reference to the mode in which Edward III. overcame some of the difficulties attending the appointment of Wykeham to the bishopric of Winchester. These difficulties arose, not from any reluctance on the part of Pope Urban V. to the selection of Wykeham for the vacant See, but from the contest then going on between him and Edward III. with respect to Bulls of Provision. The See of Rome had been endeavouring, from the time of Henry III., to grasp the patronage of the higher ecclesiastical preferments, by issuing appointments to Sees not yet vacant, on pretence of a singular regard to the interests of those Sees, which, as was alleged, might suffer damage in the event of a vacancy; and the King was determined not to acquiesce in any such claim. Accordingly there was a struggle, not whether Wykeham should be Bishop of Winchester or not, but by

whose appointment he should assume the duties of the See. This is very clearly made out by Lowth, in his 'Life of Wykeham,' p. 45. The narrative of Froissart is there quoted. It is printed in the original French, at p. 50, *supra*, but, for the benefit of those of our readers who may not be familiar with the diction of Froissart, it may be as well to subjoin the following translation:—"Before this time a fortunate circumstance happened to Duke Louis de Bourbon, who was one of the hostages in England [for the King of France's ransom as prisoner at the Battle of Poitiers]. By favour of the King of England he had returned to France, and while he was at Paris with his brother-in-law King Charles, it chanced that the Bishop of Winchester, Chancellor of England, died. There was at that time a priest in England, of the name of William of Wykeham. This William was so high in the King's grace, that nothing was done in any respect whatever without his advice. When the chancellorship and bishopric thus became vacant, the King of England immediately wrote to the Duke of Bourbon, at the request and prayer of the said William, to beg of him, through the affection he had for him, to go to the Holy Father Urban, and prevail on him to grant the vacant bishopric of Winchester to his chaplain; and that, in return, he would be very courteous to him as to his ransom. When the Duke of Bourbon received the messengers with the letter of the King of England, he was much pleased, and explained to the King of France what the King of England and Sir William wanted him to do. The King advised him to go to the Pope. The Duke, therefore, with his attendants, immediately set out, and travelled until they came to Avignon, where Pope Urban resided, *for he had not as yet set out for Rome*. The Duke made his request to the Holy Father, who directly granted it, and gave to him the bishopric of Winchester to dispose

of as he should please. And, if he found the King of England courteous and liberal as to his ransom, he was very willing that Wykeham should have this bishopric. The Duke, upon this, returned to France, and afterwards to England, where he entered into a treaty with the King for his ransom, showing at the same time his Bull from the Pope. The King, who loved Wykeham very much, did whatever he desired. The Duke had his liberty on paying twenty thousand francs,¹ and Sir William Wykeham was made Bishop of Winchester and Chancellor of England.”²

The latter portion of this narrative will receive still further elucidation from the following short extract from Lowth (p. 46), which shows more fully the issue of the rival pretensions of the Pope and the King:—“However, in the present case it seems to have been agreed that each party should in some measure allow the pretensions of the other. Accordingly the Pope’s Bull of July 14, 1367, before mentioned, in which he refers to the Bull of Provision, is nevertheless directed to William, Bishop elect of Winchester; and on the other hand, the King, in his Letters Patent of the 12th of October, 1367, by which he grants him the temporalities of the bishopric, acknowledges him Bishop of Winchester by the Pope’s provision, without mentioning his election. He was enthroned in the Cathedral church of Winchester, by William de Askeby, Archdeacon of Northampton, by commission from the Cardinal-Archdeacon of Canterbury’s Procurator-General, on the 9th of July, 1368, who acknowledges him Bishop of Winchester by election, confirmation, and consecration, without any mention at all of the Pope’s provision.”

This brief sketch of the transactions of which the letter from William of Wykeham to Lord Cobham

¹ This is not correct; the sum was forty thousand crowns, as will be seen afterwards.

² Johnes’s Froissart, iii. 385.

forms a part, will render more intelligible the letter itself, and the following document, collected from Rymer, will explain more clearly its actual purport and object. The letter is as follows:—

“Trescher sire, veulliez sauoir q̄ yce dymenge ie enuoiaiy p^r Cauai, le vallet Symond Bochel, qi vynt a moi a Shene, ou ie lui parlay de leschange dont vous sauez ; et yce Lundy il enuoit vn vallet deuers Parys, & lui ad charge qil y soit oue toute la haste qil purra per la dite cause. Et le dit Symond ou Barthū Spifanie son piere enuoieront deuers leur compaignons queu part q̄ le pape sra de vous faire p^rstement paier la some dont estoit parlé entre nous ; issuit qil neu busoigne mie q̄ vous aillez ne enuoiez deuers Parys p^r celle cause, car seurument vous trouerez le dit paiemiunt deuant vous en les mains de ditz compaignons, quel lieu q̄ le pape sra troue.

“Trescher sire, Liu Seint esperit vous veulle garder en sanitee.

“Escr a Shene, en gnde haste, yce Lundy. Sur mon departir.

“WILL^M DE WIKEHAM.

“A mon t^ssch amy, Johan Seign^r de Cobeham.”

“My very dear Lord, be pleased to understand that this Sunday (*i. e.* yesterday) I sent for Caval, the confidential messenger of Symond Bochel, who came to me at Shene, where I spoke to him about the exchange (*i. e.* remittance), of which you are aware. And this present Monday he is sending a confidential messenger to Paris, and has charged him to be there with all the haste he can for the said purpose. And the said Symond, or Bartholomew Spifanie, his father, will send to their partners, to cause the sum, which was spoken of between us, to be immediately paid to you, in whatever place the Pope may be. Also, that it is by no means necessary that you should go or send to Paris on this account, for you will certainly find the said payment before you in the hands of the said partners, whatever be the place where the Pope shall be found.

“My very dear Lord, may the Holy Spirit be pleased to keep you in health.

“Written at Shene, in great haste, this present Monday, at the moment of my departure.

“WILLIAM DE WIKEHAM.

“To my very dear friend, John Lord Cobham.”

The first impression on reading this letter is undoubtedly this, that Lord Cobham was to be the bearer of a present to the Pope; but this, on further investigation, does not appear to have been the case.

It has been already stated that the Duke of Bourbon was commissioned to go to the Pope for the purpose of using his influence with him in favour of Wykeham. Froissart also states that the Pope was residing at Avignon, "*for he had not as yet set out for Rome.*" It was in the year 1367 that Pope Urban V. actually commenced residing at Rome, having for some years lived at Avignon.

On the 14th of August, 1366, Pope Urban writes to Edward III., to solicit an extension of leave of absence for the Duke, and on December 20 of the same year a commission was issued to Lord Cobham to take fresh oaths and securities from the Duke, with this object. This he did "*ad Luppam*" (at the Louvre), near Paris, as appears by the notary's certificate, Monday, January 18, 1367. Here we find Lord Cobham in communication with the Duke; and amongst Rymer's documents, in 1367, we find the following acquittance from Edward III. to the Duke of Bourbon (Rymer, vol. vi. p. 581, 1367):—

“Acquietantia pro Duce de Burbon.

“Le Roi a nostre treschere cousin Loys, Duc de Burbon & Counte de Claremount, Saluz.

“Come par voz lettres ouvertes sealles de Vestre seal vous nous soiez tenuz & obligez en Quarrante milles escuz (dont les deux valent un Noble de nostre monoie d’Engleterre) a paiar as certains lieu et Termes, sicome en vos ditz lettres est plus largement compris :

“Nous confessons en pure verite que nous avons receuz & countee de vous Dys milles escutz tieulx come dessus, *par les mains de Kavall Paff, attourne Simond Bochel, Marchantz de Luk*, en deduction & rebat & partie de paiement de la somme de Quarrante mill escutz devant ditz :

“Dont nous vous quitons, delivrons et deschargeons, et vos Heirs a touz jours; mais

“La dite obligacion et touz voz autres obligacions et cove-nances a nous faites, quant as autres choses, demurantz en leur effec, force & vertue.

“Don par tesmoignance de nostre grant seal a nostre Palays de Westm le vj jour de Decembre.”

It will at once be seen that this money was actually paid to the King by the very person, *Kaval or Caval, the vallet or attourne of Simond Bochel*, with whom William of Wykeham describes himself to have been in communication on the subject of “leschange dont vous savez,” to Lord Cobham. But it appears that the remainder of the ransom was paid through a wholly different channel. In the sixth volume of Rymer, p. 616, is a safe-conduct for Hugh de Digome, *chivaler du dit Duc* (Bourbon), for the purpose of bringing the remainder. This is dated March 31, 1369. It therefore seems to be a fair deduction from all these facts, that either the whole or a part of the first instalment of ten thousand crowns, towards the Duke's ransom, was furnished by Wykeham. This conjecture is far more natural and probable than the other. When Edward expressed his willingness to sacrifice a portion of the ransom, nothing would be more likely than that Wykeham, who was after all the person to reap most of the benefit, should also make a proportionate sacrifice. And whilst it exactly fits in with all the known facts, it puts an end to the painful supposition that a simoniacal tampering was going on with the Pope himself, through the agency of one of the most gallant and distinguished noblemen of the day.

In conclusion, the penmanship and general style of the facsimile which accompanies these remarks may fairly be appealed to as decidedly overthrowing the calumny which some writers have endeavoured to heap

on the great Bishop of Winchester, namely, that he was an illiterate person, and that this was the reason why Edward hesitated to appoint him Bishop of Winchester. This is a point which in a great measure addresses itself to the eye, and therefore is not a subject for reasoning. But the general tone of the letter is so easy, though addressed, whilst he was yet only an arch-deacon, to a person of great eminence, that it is quite as satisfactory as the caligraphy, and both the one and the other may well have weight in disproof of this accusation with every unprejudiced person.

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