

VII THE PROBLEM OF THE PLANTAGENETS

It is a point of prestige with what is called the Higher Criticism in all branches to proclaim that certain popular texts and authorities are "late," and therefore apparently worthless. Two similar events are always the same event, and the later alone is even credible. This fanaticism is often in mere fact mistaken; it ignores the most common coincidences of human life: and some future critic will probably say that the tale of the Tower of Babel cannot be older than the Eiffel Tower, because there was certainly a confusion of tongues at the Paris Exhibition. Most of the mediæval remains familiar to the modern reader are necessarily "late," such as Chaucer or the Robin Hood ballads; but they are none the less, to a wiser criticism, worthy of attention and even trust. That which lingers after an epoch is generally that which lived most luxuriantly in it. It is an excellent habit to read history backwards. It is far wiser for a modern man to read the Middle Ages backwards from Shakespeare, whom he can judge for himself, and who yet is crammed with the Middle Ages, than to attempt to read them forwards from Cædmon, of whom he can know nothing, and of whom even the authorities he must trust know very little. If this be true of Shakespeare, it is even truer, of course, of Chaucer. If we really want to know what was strongest in the twelfth century, it is no bad way to ask what remained of it in the fourteenth. When the average reader turns to the "Canterbury Tales," which are still as amusing as Dickens yet as mediæval as Durham Cathedral, what is the very first question to be asked? Why, for instance, are they called Canterbury Tales; and what were the pilgrims doing on the road to Canterbury? They were, of course, taking part in a popular festival like a modern public holiday, though much more genial and leisurely. Nor are we, perhaps, prepared to accept it as a self-evident step in progress that their holidays were derived from saints, while ours are dictated by bankers.

It is almost necessary to say nowadays that a saint means a very good man. The notion of an eminence merely moral, consistent with complete stupidity or unsuccess, is a revolutionary image grown unfamiliar by its very familiarity, and needing, as do so many things of this older society, some almost preposterous modern parallel to give its original freshness and point. If we entered a foreign town and found a pillar like the Nelson Column, we should be surprised to learn that the hero on the top of it had been famous for his politeness and hilarity during a chronic toothache. If a procession came down the street with a brass band and a hero on a white horse, we should think it odd to be told that he had been very patient with a half-witted maiden aunt. Yet some such pantomime impossibility is the only measure of the innovation of the Christian idea of a popular and recognized saint. It must especially be realized that while this kind of

glory was the highest, it was also in a sense the lowest. The materials of it were almost the same as those of labour and domesticity: it did not need the sword or sceptre, but rather the staff or spade. It was the ambition of poverty. All this must be approximately visualized before we catch a glimpse of the great effects of the story which lay behind the Canterbury Pilgrimage.

The first few lines of Chaucer's poem, to say nothing of thousands in the course of it, make it instantly plain that it was no case of secular revels still linked by a slight ritual to the name of some forgotten god, as may have happened in the pagan decline. Chaucer and his friends did think about St. Thomas, at least more frequently than a clerk at Margate thinks about St. Lubbock. They did definitely believe in the bodily cures wrought for them through St. Thomas, at least as firmly as the most enlightened and progressive modern can believe in those of Mrs. Eddy. Who was St. Thomas, to whose shrine the whole of that society is thus seen in the act of moving; and why was he so important? If there be a streak of sincerity in the claim to teach social and democratic history, instead of a string of kings and battles, this is the obvious and open gate by which to approach the figure which disputed England with the first Plantagenet. A real popular history should think more of his popularity even than his policy. And unquestionably thousands of ploughmen, carpenters, cooks, and yeomen, as in the motley crowd of Chaucer, knew a great deal about St. Thomas when they had never even heard of Becket.

It would be easy to detail what followed the Conquest as the feudal tangle that it was, till a prince from Anjou repeated the unifying effort of the Conqueror. It is found equally easy to write of the Red King's hunting instead of his building, which has lasted longer, and which he probably loved much more. It is easy to catalogue the questions he disputed with Anselm--leaving out the question Anselm cared most about, and which he asked with explosive simplicity, as, "Why was God a man?" All this is as simple as saying that a king died of eating lampreys, from which, however, there is little to learn nowadays, unless it be that when a modern monarch perishes of gluttony the newspapers seldom say so. But if we want to know what really happened to England in this dim epoch, I think it can be dimly but truly traced in the story of St. Thomas of Canterbury.

Henry of Anjou, who brought fresh French blood into the monarchy, brought also a refreshment of the idea for which the French have always stood: the idea in the Roman Law of something impersonal and omnipresent. It is the thing we smile at even in a small French detective story; when Justice opens a handbag or Justice runs after a cab. Henry II. really produced this impression of being a police force in person; a contemporary priest compared his restless vigilance to the bird and the fish of scripture whose way no man knoweth. Kinghood, however, meant law and not caprice; its ideal at least was a justice cheap and obvious as daylight, an

atmosphere which lingers only in popular phrases about the King's English or the King's highway. But though it tended to be egalitarian it did not, of itself, tend to be humanitarian. In modern France, as in ancient Rome, the other name of Justice has sometimes been Terror. The Frenchman especially is always a Revolutionist--and never an Anarchist. Now this effort of kings like Henry II. to rebuild on a plan like that of the Roman Law was not only, of course, crossed and entangled by countless feudal fancies and feelings in themselves as well as others, it was also conditioned by what was the corner-stone of the whole civilization. It had to happen not only with but within the Church. For a Church was to these men rather a world they lived in than a building to which they went. Without the Church the Middle Ages would have had no law, as without the Church the Reformation would have had no Bible. Many priests expounded and embellished the Roman Law, and many priests supported Henry II. And yet there was another element in the Church, stored in its first foundations like dynamite, and destined in every age to destroy and renew the world. An idealism akin to impossibilism ran down the ages parallel to all its political compromises. Monasticism itself was the throwing off of innumerable Utopias, without posterity yet with perpetuity. It had, as was proved recurrently after corrupt epochs, a strange secret of getting poor quickly; a mushroom magnificence of destitution. This wind of revolution in the crusading time caught Francis in Assissi and stripped him of his rich garments in the street. The same wind of revolution suddenly smote Thomas Becket, King Henry's brilliant and luxurious Chancellor, and drove him on to an unearthly glory and a bloody end.

Becket was a type of those historic times in which it is really very practical to be impracticable. The quarrel which tore him from his friend's side cannot be appreciated in the light of those legal and constitutional debates which the misfortunes of the seventeenth century have made so much of in more recent history. To convict St. Thomas of illegality and clerical intrigue, when he set the law of the Church against that of the State, is about as adequate as to convict St. Francis of bad heraldry when he said he was the brother of the sun and moon. There may have been heralds stupid enough to say so even in that much more logical age, but it is no sufficient way of dealing with visions or with revolutions. St. Thomas of Canterbury was a great visionary and a great revolutionist, but so far as England was concerned his revolution failed and his vision was not fulfilled. We are therefore told in the text-books little more than that he wrangled with the King about certain regulations; the most crucial being whether "criminous clerks" should be punished by the State or the Church. And this was indeed the chief text of the dispute; but to realise it we must reiterate what is hardest for modern England to understand--the nature of the Catholic Church when it was itself a government, and the permanent sense in which it was itself a revolution.

It is always the first fact that escapes notice; and the first fact about the Church was that it created a machinery of pardon, where the State could only work with a machinery of punishment. It claimed to be a divine detective who helped the criminal to escape by a plea of guilty. It was, therefore, in the very nature of the institution, that when it did punish materially it punished more lightly. If any modern man were put back in the Becket quarrel, his sympathies would certainly be torn in two; for if the King's scheme was the more rational, the Archbishop's was the more humane. And despite the horrors that darkened religious disputes long afterwards, this character was certainly in the bulk the historic character of Church government. It is admitted, for instance, that things like eviction, or the harsh treatment of tenants, was practically unknown wherever the Church was landlord. The principle lingered into more evil days in the form by which the Church authorities handed over culprits to the secular arm to be killed, even for religious offences. In modern romances this is treated as a mere hypocrisy; but the man who treats every human inconsistency as a hypocrisy is himself a hypocrite about his own inconsistencies.

Our world, then, cannot understand St. Thomas, any more than St. Francis, without accepting very simply a flaming and even fantastic charity, by which the great Archbishop undoubtedly stands for the victims of this world, where the wheel of fortune grinds the faces of the poor. He may well have been too idealistic; he wished to protect the Church as a sort of earthly paradise, of which the rules might seem to him as paternal as those of heaven, but might well seem to the King as capricious as those of fairyland. But if the priest was too idealistic, the King was really too practical; it is intrinsically true to say he was too practical to succeed in practice. There re-enters here, and runs, I think, through all English history, the rather indescribable truth I have suggested about the Conqueror; that perhaps he was hardly impersonal enough for a pure despot. The real moral of our mediæval story is, I think, subtly contrary to Carlyle's vision of a stormy strong man to hammer and weld the state like a smith. Our strong men were too strong for us, and too strong for themselves. They were too strong for their own aim of a just and equal monarchy. The smith broke upon the anvil the sword of state that he was hammering for himself. Whether or no this will serve as a key to the very complicated story of our kings and barons, it is the exact posture of Henry II. to his rival. He became lawless out of sheer love of law. He also stood, though in a colder and more remote manner, for the whole people against feudal oppression; and if his policy had succeeded in its purity, it would at least have made impossible the privilege and capitalism of later times. But that bodily restlessness which stamped and spurned the furniture was a symbol of him; it was some such thing that prevented him and his heirs from sitting as quietly on their throne as the heirs of St. Louis. He thrust again and again at the tough intangibility of the priests' Utopianism like a man fighting a ghost; he answered transcendental defiances with baser material persecutions; and at last, on a dark

and, I think, decisive day in English history, his word sent four feudal murderers into the cloisters of Canterbury, who went there to destroy a traitor and who created a saint.

At the grave of the dead man broke forth what can only be called an epidemic of healing. For miracles so narrated there is the same evidence as for half the facts of history; and any one denying them must deny them upon a dogma. But something followed which would seem to modern civilization even more monstrous than a miracle. If the reader can imagine Mr. Cecil Rhodes submitting to be horsewhipped by a Boer in St. Paul's Cathedral, as an apology for some indefensible death incidental to the Jameson Raid, he will form but a faint idea of what was meant when Henry II. was beaten by monks at the tomb of his vassal and enemy. The modern parallel called up is comic, but the truth is that mediæval actualities have a violence that does seem comic to our conventions. The Catholics of that age were driven by two dominant thoughts: the all-importance of penitence as an answer to sin, and the all-importance of vivid and evident external acts as a proof of penitence. Extravagant humiliation after extravagant pride for them restored the balance of sanity. The point is worth stressing, because without it moderns make neither head nor tail of the period. Green gravely suggests, for instance, of Henry's ancestor Fulk of Anjou, that his tyrannies and frauds were further blackened by "low superstition," which led him to be dragged in a halter round a shrine, scourged and screaming for the mercy of God. Mediævals would simply have said that such a man might well scream for it, but his scream was the only logical comment he could make. But they would have quite refused to see why the scream should be added to the sins and not subtracted from them. They would have thought it simply muddle-headed to have the same horror at a man for being horribly sinful and for being horribly sorry.

But it may be suggested, I think, though with the doubt proper to ignorance, that the Angevin ideal of the King's justice lost more by the death of St. Thomas than was instantly apparent in the horror of Christendom, the canonization of the victim and the public penance of the tyrant. These things indeed were in a sense temporary; the King recovered the power to judge clerics, and many later kings and justiciars continued the monarchical plan. But I would suggest, as a possible clue to puzzling after events, that here and by this murderous stroke the crown lost what should have been the silent and massive support of its whole policy. I mean that it lost the people.

It need not be repeated that the case for despotism is democratic. As a rule its cruelty to the strong is kindness to the weak. An autocrat cannot be judged as a historical character by his relations with other historical characters. His true applause comes not from the few actors on the lighted stage of aristocracy, but from that enormous audience which must always sit in darkness throughout the

drama. The king who helps numberless helps nameless men, and when he flings his widest largesse he is a Christian doing good by stealth. This sort of monarchy was certainly a mediæval ideal, nor need it necessarily fail as a reality. French kings were never so merciful to the people as when they were merciless to the peers; and it is probably true that a Czar who was a great lord to his intimates was often a little father in innumerable little homes. It is overwhelmingly probable that such a central power, though it might at last have deserved destruction in England as in France, would in England as in France have prevented the few from seizing and holding all the wealth and power to this day. But in England it broke off short, through something of which the slaying of St. Thomas may well have been the supreme example. It was something overstrained and startling and against the instincts of the people. And of what was meant in the Middle Ages by that very powerful and rather peculiar thing, the people, I shall speak in the next chapter.

In any case this conjecture finds support in the ensuing events. It is not merely that, just as the great but personal plan of the Conqueror collapsed after all into the chaos of the Stephen transition, so the great but personal plan of the first Plantagenet collapsed into the chaos of the Barons' Wars. When all allowance is made for constitutional fictions and afterthoughts, it does seem likely that here for the first time some moral strength deserted the monarchy. The character of Henry's second son John (for Richard belongs rather to the last chapter) stamped it with something accidental and yet symbolic. It was not that John was a mere black blot on the pure gold of the Plantagenets, the texture was much more mixed and continuous; but he really was a discredited Plantagenet, and as it were a damaged Plantagenet. It was not that he was much more of a bad man than many opposed to him, but he was the kind of bad man whom bad men and good do combine to oppose. In a sense subtler than that of the legal and parliamentary logic-chopping invented long afterwards, he certainly managed to put the Crown in the wrong. Nobody suggested that the barons of Stephen's time starved men in dungeons to promote political liberty, or hung them up by the heels as a symbolic request for a free parliament. In the reign of John and his son it was still the barons, and not in the least the people, who seized the power; but there did begin to appear a case for their seizing it, for contemporaries as well as constitutional historians afterwards. John, in one of his diplomatic doublings, had put England into the papal care, as an estate is put in Chancery. And unluckily the Pope, whose counsels had generally been mild and liberal, was then in his death-grapple with the Germanic Emperor and wanted every penny he could get to win. His winning was a blessing to Europe, but a curse to England, for he used the island as a mere treasury for this foreign war. In this and other matters the baronial party began to have something like a principle, which is the backbone of a policy. Much conventional history that connects their councils with a thing like our House of Commons is as far-fetched as it would be to say that the Speaker

wields a Mace like those which the barons brandished in battle. Simon de Montfort was not an enthusiast for the Whig theory of the British Constitution, but he was an enthusiast for something. He founded a parliament in a fit of considerable absence of mind; but it was with true presence of mind, in the responsible and even religious sense which had made his father so savage a Crusader against heretics, that he laid about him with his great sword before he fell at Evesham.

Magna Carta was not a step towards democracy, but it was a step away from despotism. If we hold that double truth firmly, we have something like a key to the rest of English history. A rather loose aristocracy not only gained but often deserved the name of liberty. And the history of the English can be most briefly summarized by taking the French motto of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity," and noting that the English have sincerely loved the first and lost the other two.

In the contemporary complication much could be urged both for the Crown and the new and more national rally of the nobility. But it was a complication, whereas a miracle is a plain matter that any man can understand. The possibilities or impossibilities of St. Thomas Becket were left a riddle for history; the white flame of his audacious theocracy was frustrated, and his work cut short like a fairy tale left untold. But his memory passed into the care of the common people, and with them he was more active dead than alive--yes, even more busy. In the next chapter we shall consider what was meant in the Middle Ages by the common people, and how uncommon we should think it to-day. And in the last chapter we have already seen how in the Crusading age the strangest things grew homely, and men fed on travellers' tales when there were no national newspapers. A many-coloured pageant of martyrology on numberless walls and windows had familiarized the most ignorant with alien cruelties in many climes; with a bishop flayed by Danes or a virgin burned by Saracens, with one saint stoned by Jews and another hewn in pieces by negroes. I cannot think it was a small matter that among these images one of the most magnificent had met his death but lately at the hands of an English monarch. There was at least something akin to the primitive and epical romances of that period in the tale of those two mighty friends, one of whom struck too hard and slew the other. It may even have been so early as this that something was judged in silence; and for the multitude rested on the Crown a mysterious seal of insecurity like that of Cain, and of exile on the English kings.