XI THE REBELLION OF THE RICH

Sir Thomas More, apart from any arguments about the more mystical meshes in which he was ultimately caught and killed, will be hailed by all as a hero of the New Learning; that great dawn of a more rational daylight which for so many made mediævalism seem a mere darkness. Whatever we think of his appreciation of the Reformation, there will be no dispute about his appreciation of the Renascence. He was above all things a Humanist and a very human one. He was even in many ways very modern, which some rather erroneously suppose to be the same as being human; he was also humane, in the sense of humanitarian. He sketched an ideal, or rather perhaps a fanciful social system, with something of the ingenuity of Mr. H. G. Wells, but essentially with much more than the flippancy attributed to Mr. Bernard Shaw. It is not fair to charge the Utopian notions upon his morality; but their subjects and suggestions mark what (for want of a better word) we can only call his modernism. Thus the immortality of animals is the sort of transcendentalism which savours of evolution; and the grosser jest about the preliminaries of marriage might be taken quite seriously by the students of Eugenics. He suggested a sort of pacifism--though the Utopians had a quaint way of achieving it. In short, while he was, with his friend Erasmus, a satirist of mediæval abuses, few would now deny that Protestantism would be too narrow rather than too broad for him. If he was obviously not a Protestant, there are few Protestants who would deny him the name of a Reformer. But he was an innovator in things more alluring to modern minds than theology; he was partly what we should call a Neo-Pagan. His friend Colet summed up that escape from mediævalism which might be called the passage from bad Latin to good Greek. In our loose modern debates they are lumped together; but Greek learning was the growth of this time; there had always been a popular Latin, if a dog-Latin. It would be nearer the truth to call the mediævals bi-lingual than to call their Latin a dead language. Greek never, of course, became so general a possession; but for the man who got it, it is not too much to say that he felt as if he were in the open air for the first time. Much of this Greek spirit was reflected in More; its universality, its urbanity, its balance of buoyant reason and cool curiosity. It is even probable that he shared some of the excesses and errors of taste which inevitably infected the splendid intellectualism of the reaction against the Middle Ages; we can imagine him thinking gargoyles Gothic, in the sense of barbaric, or even failing to be stirred, as Sydney was, by the trumpet of "Chevy Chase." The wealth of the ancient heathen world, in wit, loveliness, and civic heroism, had so recently been revealed to that generation in its dazzling profusion and perfection, that it might seem a trifle if they did here and there an injustice to the relics of the Dark Ages. When, therefore, we look at the world with the eyes of More we are looking from the widest windows of that time; looking over an

English landscape seen for the first time very equally, in the level light of the sun at morning. For what he saw was England of the Renascence; England passing from the mediæval to the modern. Thus he looked forth, and saw many things and said many things; they were all worthy and many witty; but he noted one thing which is at once a horrible fancy and a homely and practical fact. He who looked over that landscape said: "Sheep are eating men."

This singular summary of the great epoch of our emancipation and enlightenment is not the fact usually put first in such very curt historical accounts of it. It has nothing to do with the translation of the Bible, or the character of Henry VIII., or the characters of Henry VIII.'s wives, or the triangular debates between Henry and Luther and the Pope. It was not Popish sheep who were eating Protestant men, or vice versa; nor did Henry, at any period of his own brief and rather bewildering papacy, have martyrs eaten by lambs as the heathen had them eaten by lions. What was meant, of course, by this picturesque expression, was that an intensive type of agriculture was giving way to a very extensive type of pasture. Great spaces of England which had hitherto been cut up into the commonwealth of a number of farmers were being laid under the sovereignty of a solitary shepherd. The point has been put, by a touch of epigram rather in the manner of More himself, by Mr. J. Stephen, in a striking essay now, I think, only to be found in the back files of The New Witness. He enunciated the paradox that the very much admired individual, who made two blades of grass grow instead of one, was a murderer. In the same article, Mr. Stephen traced the true moral origins of this movement, which led to the growing of so much grass and the murder, or at any rate the destruction, of so much humanity. He traced it, and every true record of that transformation traces it, to the growth of a new refinement, in a sense a more rational refinement, in the governing class. The mediæval lord had been, by comparison, a coarse fellow; he had merely lived in the largest kind of farm-house after the fashion of the largest kind of farmer. He drank wine when he could, but he was quite ready to drink ale; and science had not yet smoothed his paths with petrol. At a time later than this, one of the greatest ladies of England writes to her husband that she cannot come to him because her carriage horses are pulling the plough. In the true Middle Ages the greatest men were even more rudely hampered, but in the time of Henry VIII. the transformation was beginning. In the next generation a phrase was common which is one of the keys of the time, and is very much the key to these more ambitious territorial schemes. This or that great lord was said to be "Italianate." It meant subtler shapes of beauty, delicate and ductile glass, gold and silver not treated as barbaric stones but rather as stems and wreaths of molten metal, mirrors, cards and such trinkets bearing a load of beauty; it meant the perfection of trifles. It was not, as in popular Gothic craftsmanship, the almost unconscious touch of art upon all necessary things: rather it was the pouring of the whole soul of passionately conscious art especially into unnecessary things. Luxury was made alive with a soul. We must

remember this real thirst for beauty; for it is an explanation--and an excuse.

The old barony had indeed been thinned by the civil wars that closed at Bosworth, and curtailed by the economical and crafty policy of that unkingly king, Henry VII. He was himself a "new man," and we shall see the barons largely give place to a whole nobility of new men. But even the older families already had their faces set in the newer direction. Some of them, the Howards, for instance, may be said to have figured both as old and new families. In any case the spirit of the whole upper class can be described as increasingly new. The English aristocracy, which is the chief creation of the Reformation, is undeniably entitled to a certain praise, which is now almost universally regarded as very high praise. It was always progressive. Aristocrats are accused of being proud of their ancestors; it can truly be said that English aristocrats have rather been proud of their descendants. For their descendants they planned huge foundations and piled mountains of wealth; for their descendants they fought for a higher and higher place in the government of the state; for their descendants, above all, they nourished every new science or scheme of social philosophy. They seized the vast economic chances of pasturage; but they also drained the fens. They swept away the priests, but they condescended to the philosophers. As the new Tudor house passes through its generations a new and more rationalist civilization is being made; scholars are criticizing authentic texts; sceptics are discrediting not only popish saints but pagan philosophers; specialists are analyzing and rationalizing traditions, and sheep are eating men.

We have seen that in the fourteenth century in England there was a real revolution of the poor. It very nearly succeeded; and I need not conceal the conviction that it would have been the best possible thing for all of us if it had entirely succeeded. If Richard II. had really sprung into the saddle of Wat Tyler, or rather if his parliament had not unhorsed him when he had got there, if he had confirmed the fact of the new peasant freedom by some form of royal authority, as it was already common to confirm the fact of the Trade Unions by the form of a royal charter, our country would probably have had as happy a history as is possible to human nature. The Renascence, when it came, would have come as popular education and not the culture of a club of æsthetics. The New Learning might have been as democratic as the old learning in the old days of mediæval Paris and Oxford. The exquisite artistry of the school of Cellini might have been but the highest grade of the craft of a guild. The Shakespearean drama might have been acted by workmen on wooden stages set up in the street like Punch and Judy, the finer fulfilment of the miracle play as it was acted by a guild. The players need not have been "the king's servants," but their own masters. The great Renascence might have been liberal with its liberal education. If this be a fancy, it is at least one that cannot be disproved; the mediæval revolution was too unsuccessful at the beginning for any one to show that it need have been

unsuccessful in the end. The feudal parliament prevailed, and pushed back the peasants at least into their dubious and half-developed status. More than this it would be exaggerative to say, and a mere anticipation of the really decisive events afterwards. When Henry VIII. came to the throne the guilds were perhaps checked but apparently unchanged, and even the peasants had probably regained ground; many were still theoretically serfs, but largely under the easy landlordism of the abbots; the mediæval system still stood. It might, for all we know, have begun to grow again; but all such speculations are swamped in new and very strange things. The failure of the revolution of the poor was ultimately followed by a counter-revolution; a successful revolution of the rich.

The apparent pivot of it was in certain events, political and even personal. They roughly resolve themselves into two: the marriages of Henry VIII. and the affair of the monasteries. The marriages of Henry VIII. have long been a popular and even a stale joke; and there is a truth of tradition in the joke, as there is in almost any joke if it is sufficiently popular, and indeed if it is sufficiently stale. A jocular thing never lives to be stale unless it is also serious. Henry was popular in his first days, and even foreign contemporaries give us quite a glorious picture of a young prince of the Renascence, radiant with all the new accomplishments. In his last days he was something very like a maniac; he no longer inspired love, and even when he inspired fear, it was rather the fear of a mad dog than of a watch-dog. In this change doubtless the inconsistency and even ignominy of his Bluebeard weddings played a great part. And it is but just to him to say that, perhaps with the exception of the first and the last, he was almost as unlucky in his wives as they were in their husband. But it was undoubtedly the affair of the first divorce that broke the back of his honour, and incidentally broke a very large number of other more valuable and universal things. To feel the meaning of his fury we must realize that he did not regard himself as the enemy but rather as the friend of the Pope; there is a shadow of the old story of Becket. He had defended the Pope in diplomacy and the Church in controversy; and when he wearied of his queen and took a passionate fancy to one of her ladies, Anne Boleyn, he vaguely felt that a rather cynical concession, in that age of cynical concessions, might very well be made to him by a friend. But it is part of that high inconsistency which is the fate of the Christian faith in human hands, that no man knows when the higher side of it will really be uppermost, if only for an instant; and that the worst ages of the Church will not do or say something, as if by accident, that is worthy of the best. Anyhow, for whatever reason, Henry sought to lean upon the cushions of Leo and found he had struck his arm upon the rock of Peter. The Pope denied the new marriage; and Henry, in a storm and darkness of anger, dissolved all the old relations with the Papacy. It is probable that he did not clearly know how much he was doing then; and it is very tenable that we do not know it now. He certainly did not think he was Anti-Catholic; and, in one rather ridiculous sense, we can hardly say that he thought he was anti-

papal, since he apparently thought he was a pope. From this day really dates something that played a certain part in history, the more modern doctrine of the divine right of kings, widely different from the mediæval one. It is a matter which further embarrasses the open question about the continuity of Catholic things in Anglicanism, for it was a new note and yet one struck by the older party. The supremacy of the King over the English national church was not, unfortunately, merely a fad of the King, but became partly, and for one period, a fad of the church. But apart from all controverted questions, there is at least a human and historic sense in which the continuity of our past is broken perilously at this point. Henry not only cut off England from Europe, but what was even more important, he cuts off England from England.

The great divorce brought down Wolsey, the mighty minister who had held the scales between the Empire and the French Monarchy, and made the modern balance of power in Europe. He is often described under the dictum of Ego et Rex Meus; but he marks a stage in the English story rather because he suffered for it than because he said it. Ego et Rex Meus might be the motto of any modern Prime Minister; for we have forgotten the very fact that the word minister merely means servant. Wolsey was the last great servant who could be, and was, simply dismissed; the mark of a monarchy still absolute; the English were amazed at it in modern Germany, when Bismarck was turned away like a butler. A more awful act proved the new force was already inhuman; it struck down the noblest of the Humanists. Thomas More, who seemed sometimes like an Epicurean under Augustus, died the death of a saint under Diocletian. He died gloriously jesting; and the death has naturally drawn out for us rather the sacred savours of his soul; his tenderness and his trust in the truth of God. But for Humanism it must have seemed a monstrous sacrifice; it was somehow as if Montaigne were a martyr. And that is indeed the note; something truly to be called unnatural had already entered the naturalism of the Renascence; and the soul of the great Christian rose against it. He pointed to the sun, saying "I shall be above that fellow" with Franciscan familiarity, which can love nature because it will not worship her. So he left to his king the sun, which for so many weary days and years was to go down only on his wrath.

But the more impersonal process which More himself had observed (as noted at the beginning of this chapter) is more clearly defined, and less clouded with controversies, in the second of the two parts of Henry's policy. There is indeed a controversy about the monasteries; but it is one that is clarifying and settling every day. Now it is true that the Church, by the Renascence period, had reached a considerable corruption; but the real proofs of it are utterly different both from the contemporary despotic pretence and from the common Protestant story. It is wildly unfair, for instance, to quote the letters of bishops and such authorities denouncing the sins of monastic life, violent as they often are. They cannot

possibly be more violent than the letters of St. Paul to the purest and most primitive churches; the apostle was there writing to those Early Christians whom all churches idealize; and he talks to them as to cut-throats and thieves. The explanation, for those concerned for such subtleties, may possibly be found in the fact that Christianity is not a creed for good men, but for men. Such letters had been written in all centuries; and even in the sixteenth century they do not prove so much that there were bad abbots as that there were good bishops. Moreover, even those who profess that the monks were profligates dare not profess that they were oppressors; there is truth in Cobbett's point that where monks were landlords, they did not become rack-renting landlords, and could not become absentee landlords. Nevertheless, there was a weakness in the good institutions as well as a mere strength in the bad ones; and that weakness partakes of the worst element of the time. In the fall of good things there is almost always a touch of betrayal from within; and the abbots were destroyed more easily because they did not stand together. They did not stand together because the spirit of the age (which is very often the worst enemy of the age) was the increasing division between rich and poor; and it had partly divided even the rich and poor clergy. And the betrayal came, as it nearly always comes, from that servant of Christ who holds the bag.

To take a modern attack on liberty, on a much lower plane, we are familiar with the picture of a politician going to the great brewers, or even the great hotel proprietors, and pointing out the uselessness of a litter of little public-houses. That is what the Tudor politicians did first with the monasteries. They went to the heads of the great houses and proposed the extinction of the small ones. The great monastic lords did not resist, or, at any rate, did not resist enough; and the sack of the religious houses began. But if the lord abbots acted for a moment as lords, that could not excuse them, in the eyes of much greater lords, for having frequently acted as abbots. A momentary rally to the cause of the rich did not wipe out the disgrace of a thousand petty interferences which had told only to the advantage of the poor; and they were soon to learn that it was no epoch for their easy rule and their careless hospitality. The great houses, now isolated, were themselves brought down one by one; and the beggar, whom the monastery had served as a sort of sacred tavern, came to it at evening and found it a ruin. For a new and wide philosophy was in the world, which still rules our society. By this creed most of the mystical virtues of the old monks have simply been turned into great sins; and the greatest of these is charity.

But the populace which had risen under Richard II. was not yet disarmed. It was trained in the rude discipline of bow and bill, and organized into local groups of town and guild and manor. Over half the counties of England the people rose, and fought one final battle for the vision of the Middle Ages. The chief tool of the new tyranny, a dirty fellow named Thomas Cromwell, was specially singled out as

the tyrant, and he was indeed rapidly turning all government into a nightmare. The popular movement was put down partly by force; and there is the new note of modern militarism in the fact that it was put down by cynical professional troops, actually brought in from foreign countries, who destroyed English religion for hire. But, like the old popular rising, it was even more put down by fraud. Like the old rising, it was sufficiently triumphant to force the government to a parley; and the government had to resort to the simple expedient of calming the people with promises, and then proceeding to break first the promises and then the people, after the fashion made familiar to us by the modern politicians in their attitude towards the great strikes. The revolt bore the name of the Pilgrimage of Grace, and its programme was practically the restoration of the old religion. In connection with the fancy about the fate of England if Tyler had triumphed, it proves, I think, one thing; that his triumph, while it might or might not have led to something that could be called a reform, would have rendered quite impossible everything that we now know as the Reformation.

The reign of terror established by Thomas Cromwell became an Inquisition of the blackest and most unbearable sort. Historians, who have no shadow of sympathy with the old religion, are agreed that it was uprooted by means more horrible than have ever, perhaps, been employed in England before or since. It was a government by torturers rendered ubiquitous by spies. The spoliation of the monasteries especially was carried out, not only with a violence which recalled barbarism, but with a minuteness for which there is no other word but meanness. It was as if the Dane had returned in the character of a detective. The inconsistency of the King's personal attitude to Catholicism did indeed complicate the conspiracy with new brutalities towards Protestants; but such reaction as there was in this was wholly theological. Cromwell lost that fitful favour and was executed, but the terrorism went on the more terribly for being simplified to the single vision of the wrath of the King. It culminated in a strange act which rounds off symbolically the story told on an earlier page. For the despot revenged himself on a rebel whose defiance seemed to him to ring down three centuries. He laid waste the most popular shrine of the English, the shrine to which Chaucer had once ridden singing, because it was also the shrine where King Henry had knelt to repent. For three centuries the Church and the people had called Becket a saint, when Henry Tudor arose and called him a traitor. This might well be thought the topmost point of autocracy; and yet it was not really so.

For then rose to its supreme height of self-revelation that still stranger something of which we have, perhaps fancifully, found hints before in this history. The strong king was weak. He was immeasurably weaker than the strong kings of the Middle Ages; and whether or no his failure had been foreshadowed, he failed. The breach he had made in the dyke of the ancient doctrines let in a flood that may almost be said to have washed him away. In a sense he disappeared before he

died; for the drama that filled his last days is no longer the drama of his own character. We may put the matter most practically by saying that it is unpractical to discuss whether Froude finds any justification for Henry's crimes in the desire to create a strong national monarchy. For whether or no it was desired, it was not created. Least of all our princes did the Tudors leave behind them a secure central government, and the time when monarchy was at its worst comes only one or two generations before the time when it was weakest. But a few years afterwards, as history goes, the relations of the Crown and its new servants were to be reversed on a high stage so as to horrify the world; and the axe which had been sanctified with the blood of More and soiled with the blood of Cromwell was, at the signal of one of that slave's own descendants, to fall and to kill an English king.

The tide which thus burst through the breach and overwhelmed the King as well as the Church was the revolt of the rich, and especially of the new rich. They used the King's name, and could not have prevailed without his power, but the ultimate effect was rather as if they had plundered the King after he had plundered the monasteries. Amazingly little of the wealth, considering the name and theory of the thing, actually remained in royal hands. The chaos was increased, no doubt, by the fact that Edward VI. succeeded to the throne as a mere boy, but the deeper truth can be seen in the difficulty of drawing any real line between the two reigns. By marrying into the Seymour family, and thus providing himself with a son, Henry had also provided the country with the very type of powerful family which was to rule merely by pillage. An enormous and unnatural tragedy, the execution of one of the Seymours by his own brother, was enacted during the impotence of the childish king, and the successful Seymour figured as Lord Protector, though even he would have found it hard to say what he was protecting, since it was not even his own family. Anyhow, it is hardly too much to say that every human thing was left unprotected from the greed of such cannibal protectors. We talk of the dissolution of the monasteries, but what occurred was the dissolution of the whole of the old civilization. Lawyers and lackeys and money-lenders, the meanest of lucky men, looted the art and economics of the Middle Ages like thieves robbing a church. Their names (when they did not change them) became the names of the great dukes and marquises of our own day. But if we look back and forth in our history, perhaps the most fundamental act of destruction occurred when the armed men of the Seymours and their sort passed from the sacking of the Monasteries to the sacking of the Guilds. The mediæval Trade Unions were struck down, their buildings broken into by the soldiery, and their funds seized by the new nobility. And this simple incident takes all its common meaning out of the assertion (in itself plausible enough) that the Guilds, like everything else at that time, were probably not at their best. Proportion is the only practical thing; and it may be true that Cæsar was not feeling well on the morning of the Ides of March. But simply to say that

the Guilds declined, is about as true as saying that Cæsar quietly decayed from purely natural causes at the foot of the statue of Pompey.