XIII THE AGE OF THE PURITANS

We should be very much bored if we had to read an account of the most exciting argument or string of adventures in which unmeaning words such as "snark" or "boojum" were systematically substituted for the names of the chief characters or objects in dispute; if we were told that a king was given the alternative of becoming a snark or finally surrendering the boojum, or that a mob was roused to fury by the public exhibition of a boojum, which was inevitably regarded as a gross reflection on the snark. Yet something very like this situation is created by most modern attempts to tell the tale of the theological troubles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, while deferring to the fashionable distaste for theology in this generation--or rather in the last generation. Thus the Puritans, as their name implies, were primarily enthusiastic for what they thought was pure religion; frequently they wanted to impose it on others; sometimes they only wanted to be free to practise it themselves; but in no case can justice be done to what was finest in their characters, as well as first in their thoughts, if we never by any chance ask what "it" was that they wanted to impose or to practise. Now, there was a great deal that was very fine about many of the Puritans, which is almost entirely missed by the modern admirers of the Puritans. They are praised for things which they either regarded with indifference or more often detested with frenzy--such as religious liberty. And yet they are quite insufficiently understood, and are even undervalued, in their logical case for the things they really did care about--such as Calvinism. We make the Puritans picturesque in a way they would violently repudiate, in novels and plays they would have publicly burnt. We are interested in everything about them, except the only thing in which they were interested at all.

We have seen that in the first instance the new doctrines in England were simply an excuse for a plutocratic pillage, and that is the only truth to be told about the matter. But it was far otherwise with the individuals a generation or two after, to whom the wreck of the Armada was already a legend of national deliverance from Popery, as miraculous and almost as remote as the deliverances of which they read so realistically in the Hebrew Books now laid open to them. The august accident of that Spanish defeat may perhaps have coincided only too well with their concentration on the non-Christian parts of Scripture. It may have satisfied a certain Old Testament sentiment of the election of the English being announced in the stormy oracles of air and sea, which was easily turned into that heresy of a tribal pride that took even heavier hold upon the Germans. It is by such things that a civilized state may fall from being a Christian nation to being a Chosen People. But even if their nationalism was of a kind that has ultimately proved perilous to the comity of nations, it still was nationalism. From first to last the

Puritans were patriots, a point in which they had a marked superiority over the French Huguenots. Politically, they were indeed at first but one wing of the new wealthy class which had despoiled the Church and were proceeding to despoil the Crown. But while they were all merely the creatures of the great spoliation, many of them were the unconscious creatures of it. They were strongly represented in the aristocracy, but a great number were of the middle classes, though almost wholly the middle classes of the towns. By the poor agricultural population, which was still by far the largest part of the population, they were simply derided and detested. It may be noted, for instance, that, while they led the nation in many of its higher departments, they could produce nothing having the atmosphere of what is rather priggishly called folklore. All the popular tradition there is, as in songs, toasts, rhymes, or proverbs, is all Royalist. About the Puritans we can find no great legend. We must put up as best we can with great literature.

All these things, however, are simply things that other people might have noticed about them; they are not the most important things, and certainly not the things they thought about themselves. The soul of the movement was in two conceptions, or rather in two steps, the first being the moral process by which they arrived at their chief conclusion, and the second the chief conclusion they arrived at. We will begin with the first, especially as it was this which determined all that external social attitude which struck the eye of contemporaries. The honest Puritan, growing up in youth in a world swept bare by the great pillage, possessed himself of a first principle which is one of the three or four alternative first principles which are possible to the mind of man. It was the principle that the mind of man can alone directly deal with the mind of God. It may shortly be called the anti-sacramental principle; but it really applies, and he really applied it, to many things besides the sacraments of the Church. It equally applies, and he equally applied it, to art, to letters, to the love of locality, to music, and even to good manners. The phrase about no priest coming between a man and his Creator is but an impoverished fragment of the full philosophic doctrine; the true Puritan was equally clear that no singer or story-teller or fiddler must translate the voice of God to him into the tongues of terrestrial beauty. It is notable that the one Puritan man of genius in modern times, Tolstoy, did accept this full conclusion; denounced all music as a mere drug, and forbade his own admirers to read his own admirable novels. Now, the English Puritans were not only Puritans but Englishmen, and therefore did not always shine in clearness of head; as we shall see, true Puritanism was rather a Scotch than an English thing. But this was the driving power and the direction; and the doctrine is quite tenable if a trifle insane. Intellectual truth was the only tribute fit for the highest truth of the universe; and the next step in such a study is to observe what the Puritan thought was the truth about that truth. His individual reason, cut loose from instinct as well as tradition, taught him a concept of the omnipotence of God

which meant simply the impotence of man. In Luther, the earlier and milder form of the Protestant process only went so far as to say that nothing a man did could help him except his confession of Christ; with Calvin it took the last logical step and said that even this could not help him, since Omnipotence must have disposed of all his destiny beforehand; that men must be created to be lost and saved. In the purer types of whom I speak this logic was white-hot, and we must read the formula into all their parliamentary and legal formulæ. When we read, "The Puritan party demanded reforms in the church," we must understand, "The Puritan party demanded fuller and clearer affirmation that men are created to be lost and saved." When we read, "The Army selected persons for their godliness," we must understand, "The Army selected those persons who seemed most convinced that men are created to be lost and saved." It should be added that this terrible trend was not confined even to Protestant countries; some great Romanists doubtfully followed it until stopped by Rome. It was the spirit of the age, and should be a permanent warning against mistaking the spirit of the age for the immortal spirit of man. For there are now few Christians or non-Christians who can look back at the Calvinism which nearly captured Canterbury and even Rome by the genius and heroism of Pascal or Milton, without crying out, like the lady in Mr. Bernard Shaw's play, "How splendid! How glorious!... and oh what an escape!"

The next thing to note is that their conception of church-government was in a true sense self-government; and yet, for a particular reason, turned out to be a rather selfish self-government. It was equal and yet it was exclusive. Internally the synod or conventicle tended to be a small republic, but unfortunately to be a very small republic. In relation to the street outside the conventicle was not a republic but an aristocracy. It was the most awful of all aristocracies, that of the elect; for it was not a right of birth but a right before birth, and alone of all nobilities it was not laid level in the dust. Hence we have, on the one hand, in the simpler Puritans a ring of real republican virtue; a defiance of tyrants, an assertion of human dignity, but above all an appeal to that first of all republican virtues--publicity. One of the Regicides, on trial for his life, struck the note which all the unnaturalness of his school cannot deprive of nobility: "This thing was not done in a corner." But their most drastic idealism did nothing to recover a ray of the light that at once lightened every man that came into the world, the assumption of a brotherhood in all baptized people. They were, indeed, very like that dreadful scaffold at which the Regicide was not afraid to point. They were certainly public, they may have been public-spirited, they were never popular; and it seems never to have crossed their minds that there was any need to be popular. England was never so little of a democracy as during the short time when she was a republic.

The struggle with the Stuarts, which is the next passage in our history, arose

from an alliance, which some may think an accidental alliance, between two things. The first was this intellectual fashion of Calvinism which affected the cultured world as did our recent intellectual fashion of Collectivism. The second was the older thing which had made that creed and perhaps that cultured world possible--the aristocratic revolt under the last Tudors. It was, we might say, the story of a father and a son dragging down the same golden image, but the younger really from hatred of idolatry, and the older solely from love of gold. It is at once the tragedy and the paradox of England that it was the eternal passion that passed, and the transient or terrestrial passion that remained. This was true of England; it was far less true of Scotland; and that is the meaning of the Scotch and English war that ended at Worcester. The first change had indeed been much the same materialist matter in both countries--a mere brigandage of barons; and even John Knox, though he has become a national hero, was an extremely anti-national politician. The patriot party in Scotland was that of Cardinal Beaton and Mary Stuart. Nevertheless, the new creed did become popular in the Lowlands in a positive sense, not even yet known in our own land. Hence in Scotland Puritanism was the main thing, and was mixed with Parliamentary and other oligarchies. In England Parliamentary oligarchy was the main thing, and was mixed with Puritanism. When the storm began to rise against Charles I., after the more or less transitional time of his father, the Scotch successor of Elizabeth, the instances commonly cited mark all the difference between democratic religion and aristocratic politics. The Scotch legend is that of Jenny Geddes, the poor woman who threw a stool at the priest. The English legend is that of John Hampden, the great squire who raised a county against the King. The Parliamentary movement in England was, indeed, almost wholly a thing of squires, with their new allies the merchants. They were squires who may well have regarded themselves as the real and natural leaders of the English; but they were leaders who allowed no mutiny among their followers. There was certainly no Village Hampden in Hampden Village.

The Stuarts, it may be suspected, brought from Scotland a more mediæval and therefore more logical view of their own function; for the note of their nation was logic. It is a proverb that James I. was a Scot and a pedant; it is hardly sufficiently noted that Charles I. also was not a little of a pedant, being very much of a Scot. He had also the virtues of a Scot, courage, and a quite natural dignity and an appetite for the things of the mind. Being somewhat Scottish, he was very un-English, and could not manage a compromise: he tried instead to split hairs, and seemed merely to break promises. Yet he might safely have been far more inconsistent if he had been a little hearty and hazy; but he was of the sort that sees everything in black and white; and it is therefore remembered--especially the black. From the first he fenced with his Parliament as with a mere foe; perhaps he almost felt it as a foreigner. The issue is familiar, and we need not be so careful as the gentleman who wished to finish the chapter in order to find out

what happened to Charles I. His minister, the great Strafford, was foiled in an attempt to make him strong in the fashion of a French king, and perished on the scaffold, a frustrated Richelieu. The Parliament claiming the power of the purse, Charles appealed to the power of the sword, and at first carried all before him; but success passed to the wealth of the Parliamentary class, the discipline of the new army, and the patience and genius of Cromwell; and Charles died the same death as his great servant.

Historically, the quarrel resolved itself, through ramifications generally followed perhaps in more detail than they deserve, into the great modern query of whether a King can raise taxes without the consent of his Parliament. The test case was that of Hampden, the great Buckinghamshire magnate, who challenged the legality of a tax which Charles imposed, professedly for a national navy. As even innovators always of necessity seek for sanctity in the past, the Puritan squires made a legend of the mediæval Magna Carta; and they were so far in a true tradition that the concession of John had really been, as we have already noted, anti-despotic without being democratic. These two truths cover two parts of the problem of the Stuart fall, which are of very different certainty, and should be considered separately.

For the first point about democracy, no candid person, in face of the facts, can really consider it at all. It is quite possible to hold that the seventeenth-century Parliament was fighting for the truth; it is not possible to hold that it was fighting for the populace. After the autumn of the Middle Ages Parliament was always actively aristocratic and actively anti-popular. The institution which forbade Charles I. to raise Ship Money was the same institution which previously forbade Richard II. to free the serfs. The group which claimed coal and minerals from Charles I. was the same which afterward claimed the common lands from the village communities. It was the same institution which only two generations before had eagerly helped to destroy, not merely things of popular sentiment like the monasteries, but all the things of popular utility like the guilds and parishes, the local governments of towns and trades. The work of the great lords may have had, indeed it certainly had, another more patriotic and creative side; but it was exclusively the work of the great lords that was done by Parliament. The House of Commons has itself been a House of Lords.

But when we turn to the other or anti-despotic aspect of the campaign against the Stuarts, we come to something much more difficult to dismiss and much more easy to justify. While the stupidest things are said against the Stuarts, the real contemporary case for their enemies is little realized; for it is connected with what our insular history most neglects, the condition of the Continent. It should be remembered that though the Stuarts failed in England they fought for things that succeeded in Europe. These were roughly, first, the effects of the Counter-

Reformation, which made the sincere Protestant see Stuart Catholicism not at all as the last flicker of an old flame, but as the spread of a conflagration. Charles II., for instance, was a man of strong, sceptical, and almost irritably humorous intellect, and he was quite certainly, and even reluctantly, convinced of Catholicism as a philosophy. The other and more important matter here was the almost awful autocracy that was being built up in France like a Bastille. It was more logical, and in many ways more equal and even equitable than the English oligarchy, but it really became a tyranny in case of rebellion or even resistance. There were none of the rough English safeguards of juries and good customs of the old common law; there was lettre de cachet as unanswerable as magic. The English who defied the law were better off than the French; a French satirist would probably have retorted that it was the English who obeyed the law who were worse off than the French. The ordering of men's normal lives was with the squire; but he was, if anything, more limited when he was the magistrate. He was stronger as master of the village, but actually weaker as agent of the King. In defending this state of things, in short, the Whigs were certainly not defending democracy, but they were in a real sense defending liberty. They were even defending some remains of mediæval liberty, though not the best; the jury though not the guild. Even feudalism had involved a localism not without liberal elements, which lingered in the aristocratic system. Those who loved such things might well be alarmed at the Leviathan of the State, which for Hobbes was a single monster and for France a single man.

As to the mere facts, it must be said again that in so far as Puritanism was pure, it was unfortunately passing. And the very type of the transition by which it passed can be found in that extraordinary man who is popularly credited with making it predominate. Oliver Cromwell is in history much less the leader of Puritanism than the tamer of Puritanism. He was undoubtedly possessed, certainly in his youth, possibly all his life, by the rather sombre religious passions of his period; but as he emerges into importance, he stands more and more for the Positivism of the English as compared with the Puritanism of the Scotch. He is one of the Puritan squires; but he is steadily more of the squire and less of the Puritan; and he points to the process by which the squirearchy became at last merely pagan. This is the key to most of what is praised and most of what is blamed in him; the key to the comparative sanity, toleration and modern efficiency of many of his departures; the key to the comparative coarseness, earthiness, cynicism, and lack of sympathy in many others. He was the reverse of an idealist; and he cannot without absurdity be held up as an ideal; but he was, like most of the squires, a type genuinely English; not without public spirit, certainly not without patriotism. His seizure of personal power, which destroyed an impersonal and ideal government, had something English in its very unreason. The act of killing the King, I fancy, was not primarily his, and certainly not characteristically his. It was a concession to the high inhuman ideals of the

tiny group of true Puritans, with whom he had to compromise but with whom he afterwards collided. It was logic rather than cruelty in the act that was not Cromwellian; for he treated with bestial cruelty the native Irish, whom the new spiritual exclusiveness regarded as beasts--or as the modern euphemism would put it, as aborigines. But his practical temper was more akin to such human slaughter on what seemed to him the edges of civilization, than to a sort of human sacrifice in the very centre and forum of it; he is not a representative regicide. In a sense that piece of headsmanship was rather above his head. The real regicides did it in a sort of trance or vision; and he was not troubled with visions. But the true collision between the religious and rational sides of the seventeenth-century movement came symbolically on that day of driving storm at Dunbar, when the raving Scotch preachers overruled Leslie and forced him down into the valley to be the victim of the Cromwellian common sense. Cromwell said that God had delivered them into his hand; but it was their own God who delivered them, the dark unnatural God of the Calvinist dreams, as overpowering as a nightmare--and as passing.

It was the Whig rather than the Puritan that triumphed on that day; it was the Englishman with his aristocratic compromise; and even what followed Cromwell's death, the Restoration, was an aristocratic compromise, and even a Whig compromise. The mob might cheer as for a mediæval king; but the Protectorate and the Restoration were more of a piece than the mob understood. Even in the superficial things where there seemed to be a rescue it was ultimately a respite. Thus the Puritan régime had risen chiefly by one thing unknown to mediævalism--militarism. Picked professional troops, harshly drilled but highly paid, were the new and alien instrument by which the Puritans became masters. These were disbanded and their return resisted by Tories and Whigs; but their return seemed always imminent, because it was in the spirit of the new stern world of the Thirty Years' War. A discovery is an incurable disease; and it had been discovered that a crowd could be turned into an iron centipede, crushing larger and looser crowds. Similarly the remains of Christmas were rescued from the Puritans; but they had eventually to be rescued again by Dickens from the Utilitarians, and may yet have to be rescued by somebody from the vegetarians and teetotallers. The strange army passed and vanished almost like a Moslem invasion; but it had made the difference that armed valour and victory always make, if it was but a negative difference. It was the final break in our history; it was a breaker of many things, and perhaps of popular rebellion in our land. It is something of a verbal symbol that these men founded New England in America, for indeed they tried to found it here. By a paradox, there was something prehistoric in the very nakedness of their novelty. Even the old and savage things they invoked became more savage in becoming more new. In observing what is called their Jewish Sabbath, they would have had to stone the strictest Jew. And they (and indeed their age generally) turned witch-burning from an episode to an epidemic. The destroyers

and the things destroyed disappeared together; but they remain as something nobler than the nibbling legalism of some of the Whig cynics who continued their work. They were above all things anti-historic, like the Futurists in Italy; and there was this unconscious greatness about them, that their very sacrilege was public and solemn like a sacrament; and they were ritualists even as iconoclasts. It was, properly considered, but a very secondary example of their strange and violent simplicity that one of them, before a mighty mob at Whitehall, cut off the anointed head of the sacramental man of the Middle Ages. For another, far away in the western shires, cut down the thorn of Glastonbury, from which had grown the whole story of Britain.