

SAVONAROLA

Savonarola is a man whom we shall probably never understand until we know what horror may lie at the heart of civilisation. This we shall not know until we are civilised. It may be hoped, in one sense, that we may never understand Savonarola.

The great deliverers of men have, for the most part, saved them from calamities which we all recognise as evil, from calamities which are the ancient enemies of humanity. The great law-givers saved us from anarchy: the great physicians saved us from pestilence: the great reformers saved us from starvation. But there is a huge and bottomless evil compared with which all these are flea-bites, the most desolating curse that can fall upon men or nations, and it has no name, except we call it satisfaction. Savonarola did not save men from anarchy, but from order; not from pestilence, but from paralysis; not from starvation, but from luxury. Men like Savonarola are the witnesses to the tremendous psychological fact at the back of all our brains, but for which no name has ever been found, that ease is the worst enemy of happiness, and civilisation potentially the end of man.

For I fancy that Savonarola's thrilling challenge to the luxury of his day went far deeper than the mere question of sin. The modern rationalistic admirers of Savonarola, from George Eliot downwards, dwell, truly enough, upon the sound ethical justification of Savonarola's anger, upon the hideous and extravagant character of the crimes which polluted the palaces of the Renaissance. But they need not be so anxious to show that Savonarola was no ascetic, that he merely picked out the black specks of wickedness with the priggish enlightenment of a member of an Ethical Society. Probably he did hate the civilisation of his time, and not merely its sins; and that is precisely where he was infinitely more profound than a modern moralist. He saw that the actual crimes were not the only evils: that stolen jewels and poisoned wine and obscene pictures were merely the symptoms; that the disease was the complete dependence upon jewels and wine and pictures. This is a thing constantly forgotten in judging of ascetics and Puritans in old times. A denunciation of harmless sports did not always mean an ignorant hatred of what no one but a narrow moralist would call harmful. Sometimes it meant an exceedingly enlightened hatred of what no one but a narrow moralist would call harmless. Ascetics are sometimes more advanced than the average man, as well as less.

Such, at least, was the hatred in the heart of Savonarola. He was making war against no trivial human sins, but against godless and thankless quiescence,

against getting used to happiness, the mystic sin by which all creation fell. He was preaching that severity which is the sign-manual of youth and hope. He was preaching that alertness, that clean agility and vigilance, which is as necessary to gain pleasure as to gain holiness, as indispensable in a lover as in a monk. A critic has truly pointed out that Savonarola could not have been fundamentally anti-æsthetic, since he had such friends as Michael Angelo, Botticelli, and Luca della Robbia. The fact is that this purification and austerity are even more necessary for the appreciation of life and laughter than for anything else. To let no bird fly past unnoticed, to spell patiently the stones and weeds, to have the mind a storehouse of sunset, requires a discipline in pleasure, and an education in gratitude.

The civilisation which surrounded Savonarola on every side was a civilisation which had already taken the wrong turn, the turn that leads to endless inventions and no discoveries, in which new things grow old with confounding rapidity, but in which no old things ever grow new. The monstrosity of the crimes of the Renaissance was not a mark of imagination; it was a mark, as all monstrosity is, of the loss of imagination. It is only when a man has really ceased to see a horse as it is, that he invents a centaur, only when he can no longer be surprised at an ox, that he worships the devil. Diablerie is the stimulant of the jaded fancy; it is the dram-drinking of the artist. Savonarola addressed himself to the hardest of all earthly tasks, that of making men turn back and wonder at the simplicities they had learnt to ignore. It is strange that the most unpopular of all doctrines is the doctrine which declares the common life divine. Democracy, of which Savonarola was so fiery an exponent, is the hardest of gospels; there is nothing that so terrifies men as the decree that they are all kings. Christianity, in Savonarola's mind, identical with democracy, is the hardest of gospels; there is nothing that so strikes men with fear as the saying that they are all the sons of God.

Savonarola and his republic fell. The drug of despotism was administered to the people, and they forgot what they had been. There are some at the present day who have so strange a respect for art and letters, and for mere men of genius, that they conceive the reign of the Medici to be an improvement on that of the great Florentine republican. It is such men as these and their civilisation that we have at the present day to fear. We are surrounded on many sides by the same symptoms as those which awoke the unquenchable wrath of Savonarola--a hedonism that is more sick of happiness than an invalid is sick of pain, an art sense that seeks the assistance of crime since it has exhausted nature. In many modern works we find veiled and horrible hints of a truly Renaissance sense of the beauty of blood, the poetry of murder. The bankrupt and depraved imagination does not see that a living man is far more dramatic than a dead one. Along with this, as in the time of the Medici, goes the falling back into the arms of

despotism, the hunger for the strong man which is unknown among strong men. The masterful hero is worshipped as he is worshipped by the readers of the 'Bow Bells Novelettes,' and for the same reason--a profound sense of personal weakness. That tendency to devolve our duties descends on us, which is the soul of slavery, alike whether for its menial tasks it employs serfs or emperors. Against all this the great clerical republican stands in everlasting protest, preferring his failure to his rival's success. The issue is still between him and Lorenzo, between the responsibilities of liberty and the licence of slavery, between the perils of truth and the security of silence, between the pleasure of toil and the toil of pleasure. The supporters of Lorenzo the Magnificent are assuredly among us, men for whom even nations and empires only exist to satisfy the moment, men to whom the last hot hour of summer is better than a sharp and wintry spring. They have an art, a literature, a political philosophy, which are all alike valued for their immediate effect upon the taste, not for what they promise of the destiny of the spirit. Their statuettes and sonnets are rounded and perfect, while 'Macbeth' is in comparison a fragment, and the Moses of Michael Angelo a hint. Their campaigns and battles are always called triumphant, while Cæsar and Cromwell wept for many humiliations. And the end of it all is the hell of no resistance, the hell of an unfathomable softness, until the whole nature recoils into madness and the chamber of civilisation is no longer merely a cushioned apartment, but a padded cell.

This last and worst of human miseries Savonarola saw afar off, and bent his whole gigantic energies to turning the chariot into another course. Few men understood his object; some called him a madman, some a charlatan, some an enemy of human joy. They would not even have understood if he had told them, if he had said that he was saving them from a calamity of contentment which should be the end of joys and sorrows alike. But there are those to-day who feel the same silent danger, and who bend themselves to the same silent resistance. They also are supposed to be contending for some trivial political scruple.

Mr M'Hardy says, in defending Savonarola, that the number of fine works of art destroyed in the Burning of the Vanities has been much exaggerated. I confess that I hope the pile contained stacks of incomparable masterpieces if the sacrifice made that one real moment more real. Of one thing I am sure, that Savonarola's friend Michael Angelo would have piled all his own statues one on top of the other, and burnt them to ashes, if only he had been certain that the glow transfiguring the sky was the dawn of a younger and wiser world.