

THE MEDIAEVAL VILLAIN

I see that there have been more attempts at the whitewashing of King John.

But the gentleman who wrote has a further interest in the matter; for he believes that King John was innocent, not only on this point, but as a whole. He thinks King John has been very badly treated; though I am not sure whether he would attribute to that Plantagenet a saintly merit or merely a humdrum respectability.

I sympathise with the whitewashing of King John, merely because it is a protest against our waxwork style of history. Everybody is in a particular attitude, with particular moral attributes; Rufus is always hunting and Coeur-de-Lion always crusading; Henry VIII always marrying, and Charles I always having his head cut off; Alfred rapidly and in rotation making his people's clocks and spoiling their cakes; and King John pulling out Jews' teeth with the celerity and industry of an American dentist. Anything is good that shakes all this stiff simplification, and makes us remember that these men were once alive; that is, mixed, free, flippant, and inconsistent. It gives the mind a healthy kick to know that Alfred had fits, that Charles I prevented enclosures, that Rufus was really interested in architecture, that Henry VIII was really interested in theology.

And as these scraps of reality can startle us into more solid

imagination of events, so can even errors and exaggerations if they are on the right side. It does some good to call Alfred a prig, Charles I a Puritan, and John a jolly good fellow; if this makes us feel that they were people whom we might have liked or disliked. I do not myself think that John was a nice gentleman; but for all that the popular picture of him is all wrong. Whether he had any generous qualities or not, he had what commonly makes them possible, dare-devil courage, for instance, and hotheaded decision. But, above all, he had a morality which he broke, but which we misunderstand.

The mediaeval mind turned centrally upon the pivot of Free Will. In their social system the mediaevals were too much PARTI-PER-PALE, as their heralds would say, too rigidly cut up by fences and quarterings of guild or degree. But in their moral philosophy they always thought of man as standing free and doubtful at the cross-roads in a forest. While they clad and bound the body and (to some extent) the mind too stiffly and quaintly for our taste, they had a much stronger sense than we have of the freedom of the soul. For them the soul always hung poised like an eagle in the heavens of liberty. Many of the things that strike a modern as most fantastic came from their keen sense of the power of choice.

For instance, the greatest of the Schoolmen devotes folios to the minute description of what the world would have been like if Adam had refused the apple; what kings, laws, babies, animals, planets would have been in an unfallen world. So intensely does he feel that Adam might have decided the other way that he sees a complete and complex vision of

another world, a world that now can never be.

This sense of the stream of life in a man that may turn either way can be felt through all their popular ethics in legend, chronicle, and ballad. It is a feeling which has been weakened among us by two heavy intellectual forces. The Calvinism of the seventeenth century and the physical science of the nineteenth, whatever other truths they may have taught, have darkened this liberty with a sense of doom. We think of bad men as something like black men, a separate and incurable kind of people. The Byronic spirit was really a sort of operatic Calvinism. It brought the villain upon the stage; the lost soul; the modern version of King John. But the contemporaries of King John did not feel like that about him, even when they detested him. They instinctively felt him to be a man of mixed passions like themselves, who was allowing his evil passions to have much too good a time of it. They might have spoken of him as a man in considerable danger of going to hell; but they would have not talked of him as if he had come from there. In the ballads of Percy or Robin Hood it frequently happens that the King comes upon the scene, and his ultimate decision makes the climax of the tale. But we do not feel, as we do in the Byronic or modern romance, that there is a definite stage direction "Enter Tyrant." Nor do we behold a *deus ex machina* who is certain to do all that is mild and just. The King in the ballad is in a state of virile indecision. Sometimes he will pass from a towering passion to the most sweeping magnanimity and friendliness; sometimes he will begin an act of vengeance and be turned from it by a jest. Yet this august levity is not moral indifference; it is moral

freedom. It is the strong sense in the writer that the King, being the type of man with power, will probably sometimes use it badly and sometimes well. In this sense John is certainly misrepresented, for he is pictured as something that none of his own friends or enemies saw. In that sense he was certainly not so black as he is painted, for he lived in a world where every one was piebald.

King John would be represented in a modern play or novel as a kind of degenerate; a shifty-eyed moral maniac with a twist in his soul's backbone and green blood in his veins. The mediaevals were quite capable of boiling him in melted lead, but they would have been quite incapable of despairing of his soul in the modern fashion. A striking a fortiori case is that of the strange mediaeval legend of Robert the Devil.

Robert was represented as a monstrous birth sent to an embittered woman actually in answer to prayers to Satan, and his earlier actions are simply those of the infernal fire let loose upon earth. Yet though he can be called almost literally a child of hell, yet the climax of the story is his repentance at Rome and his great reparation. That is the paradox of mediaeval morals: as it must appear to the moderns. We must try to conceive a race of men who hated John, and sought his blood, and believed every abomination about him, who would have been quite capable of assassinating or torturing him in the extremity of their anger. And yet we must admit that they would not really have been fundamentally surprised if he had shaved his head in humiliation, given all his goods to the poor, embraced the lepers in a lazaret-house, and been canonised as a saint in heaven. So strongly did they hold that the pivot of Will

should turn freely, which now is rusted, and sticks.

For we, whatever our political opinions, certainly never think of our public men like that. If we hold the opinion that Mr. Lloyd George is a noble tribune of the populace and protector of the poor, we do not admit that he can ever have paltered with the truth or bargained with the powerful. If we hold the equally idiotic opinion that he is a red and rabid Socialist, maddening mobs into mutiny and theft, then we expect him to go on maddening them—and us. We do not expect him, let us say, suddenly to go into a monastery. We have lost the idea of repentance; especially in public things; that is why we cannot really get rid of our great national abuses of economic tyranny and aristocratic avarice. Progress in the modern sense is a very dismal drudge; and mostly consists of being moved on by the police. We move on because we are not allowed to move back. But the really ragged prophets, the real revolutionists who held high language in the palaces of kings, they did not confine themselves to saying, "Onward, Christian soldiers," still less, "Onward, Futurist soldiers"; what they said to high emperors and to whole empires was, "Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die?"