

METHODISM

CHAPTER I

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

ARGUMENT

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I

To the student of the history of the English-speaking races the story of Methodism must always form one of considerable interest. A Church which enfolds some thirty millions of adherents; which has established itself in every quarter of the globe,

with especial prominence in the United States ; which is to-day, with the possible exception of the Lutheran Church, the largest Protestant Church in the world, certainly the largest Church of the English race, Protestant or otherwise ; whose indirect influence has been almost as great as its direct—is manifestly a fact in the sphere of the spiritual which cannot be ignored even by those who would on *a priori* grounds refuse to recognise its apostolic origin, or its ecclesiastical claims. In these pages, leaving on one side all that is controversial, the attempt will be made to set forth in briefest compass the origins and meaning of Methodism, with such facts in its later history as may be of more general interest.

We have stated that Methodism, with its millions of adherents in the United States, is the largest Church of English races in the world. To the English Anglican who has never travelled in America or in the English Colonies, above all, to the Scot familiar only with the predominant Presbyterianism of his native country, such a statement will come, perhaps, with surprise. Assuming the accuracy of the claim, we may point out the close connection there is between the vast extension of Methodism in the modern world and the time of its origin. For Methodism was the outcome of the eighteenth century. Now it is the fashion in certain quarters

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to look upon that century as lifeless. But it is in the eighteenth century, and in the movements, religious and political, of that most interesting age, that we discern the beginnings of the great currents, economic, social, political, intellectual, and religious, that govern the modern world. In the eighteenth century we see the older systems crumbling away under the dissolvent action of forces created and fed by the vanishing age. On all sides we note the signs of a fundamental reconstruction, culminating in Methodism and the French Revolution, in their diverse ways the most tremendous phenomena of the century, the first for the English-speaking races, the second for the world at large.

But Methodism would have been of but slight importance had not its origin coincided with the remarkable development and expansion in the political and social life of the English people. In the eighteenth century, the century that is which, properly, may be said to begin with the death of Anne and to close with the Congresses of Vienna (1714-1816), three features in the expansion of Great Britain stand out clear and distinct—the growth and consolidation of the empire and its colonies, including the United States; the organisation of the Parliamentary State, and the beginning of democracy; and the rise of the industrial revolution. Each of these great features in the evolution

of the national life has contributed to the place and power of Methodism. But as the chief effect of the new democratic ideas was seen in the internal history of Methodism itself, we shall defer any consideration of this factor to a later chapter, and confine our attention for the present to the other two.

Of these three factors the first, the physical extension of the English race, is the simplest. In the sixteenth century, in her conflict with Spain, England first discovered the value of sea-power; in the eighteenth century a series of fortunate events gave to her a hold upon the greater part of the undeveloped portions of the globe. For England the Seven Years' War was a turning-point in her national history, as indeed it was in the history of the world. England ceased to be a mere European power, whose position was determined by its place in a single continent; henceforth she claimed the Empire of the Seas, and that her destinies lay in the lands beyond the oceans. The voyages and discoveries of Cook; the intrepid adventures of North American trappers; the irresistible impulse which drew the settlers westward over the Alleghanies to the blue grass of Kentucky, on "to the Father of the Waters," and the Rockies beyond; the war which, by the fall of Quebec and the capture of Pittsburg and Louisburg, changed New France into the future Dominion

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of Canada ; the European struggles which led to the cession of the mighty area of Louisiana first to Spain, afterwards to the infant States ; the strange events which, in the next century, were destined to evolve a mighty continent from a penal settlement at Botany Bay ; the fortune which handed over an outpost of Dutch farmers and merchants at the Cape to the government of a country that, happily, knew not of the troubles the gift was destined to bring in its train—all these were part of the forces which gave to the revival, begun by the Wesleys, its world-wide opportunity. But for these Methodism could have become little more than a small sect of English Nonconformists—a position that still, by the ignorant, is so commonly assigned to her—instead of a vast imperial Church. One illustration of the importance of these factors must suffice. Let the reader take the map of North America as it was in 1712, and he will note a little strip of English settlers hemmed in on all sides by the dominions of France and Spain. If fortune had dealt otherwise in the conflicts at Pittsburg (1758), on the Heights of Abraham (1759), and in Acadia (1757), the opportunity of Methodism might have been as slight as it still is in the French provinces of Quebec, or in the Spanish countries beneath the Southern Cross.

In the marvellous expansion of the English-

speaking race, of which the eighteenth century saw the beginnings, Methodism obtained her supreme advantage. No spiritual revival, however deep, could have produced the Methodist Church of to-day if it had found the ground already occupied, or if it had been retained, like some medieval order of monks or friars, within the parent Church. But when, whether from latent forces within herself or by the folly or apathy of the bishops, Methodism was driven out of the Anglican Church, she discovered on all sides vast opportunities, some the result of new circumstances, others the issue of neglect. A simple illustration from to-day will make our meaning clear. The early years of the twentieth century have witnessed the great marvel of the re-awakening of the East. A chance has arisen the like of which has never been seen in missionary annals since the fall of the Roman Empire. As yet none can say what section of the one Church will respond to the call and claim for her Master the heritage of the East. To-day, as in the third century, the future of the world, it may be the future of the Church of Christ, lies with the denomination that seizes aright the great missionary opportunities of the age. In the seventh and eighth centuries the Roman Church established herself by the response she gave, under the lead of Gregory the Great, to the call of the barbarians, Saxons,

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Danes, and the like. In the twentieth century the church or denomination that rises to the need of China or Japan or India—be she Protestant or Roman—will be the Church of the future, in spite of all *a priori* reasonings or prepossessions. Hers will be the logic of established fact. So in the eighteenth century we witness a similar crisis, a similar opportunity, though limited, broadly speaking, to the Anglo-Saxon race. The annexation by the English of the uninhabited portions of the world was not the less the great fact of the century because it was so largely undesigned, we might almost write, accidental. In an empire founded by design provision would have been made for the transference to the new provinces of the established religion of the centre. As a matter of fact, such provision was almost totally ignored, as we see from the constant refusal of the English Government to allow the ordination of bishops for America. The failure of the Anglican Church, for reasons partly political partly spiritual, to respond to the needs of the expanding Empire issued in Methodism stepping in her own way into the vacant place, and thereby securing the remarkable position that she now holds.

II

If to the expansion of Britain we owe the world-wide extension of Methodism, its hold at home must be largely traced to the industrial revolution of the century. At the birth of Wesley the most populous counties, next to Surrey and Middlesex, were Somerset, Wilts, Oxford, Suffolk, and other country districts, none of which, however, had on the average more than sixty individuals to the square mile. At the commencement of the eighteenth century, England and Wales had a population considerably less than that of modern London, for the most part rural in character and pursuits, or living under the shadow of some ancient cathedral, or in some small county town whose picturesque decay to-day tells us of a vanished age. Apart from the capital, Bristol, Norwich and York were the only cities of any size, while the population of Worcestershire was more dense than that of Lancashire or Yorkshire. But within the lifetime of Wesley all this was changed. By the year 1800 England had become the workshop of the world, at that time the sole industrial State in existence. She had ceased to be the nation of shopkeepers that Louis XIV. had called her, not without some justification, and had become a nation of artisans and capitalists. The result of this industrial growth

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of the latter part of the eighteenth century was a revolution in which the older England, the England which for a thousand years had developed slowly but continuously on certain definite lines, passed away for ever. A new England was born, at first misshapen, undesirable, unconscious of herself; nor were there absent the usual pangs and pains of an unexpected birth.

With the incoming of the age of iron and steam, the centre of gravity was shifted from the rural south to the new populations north of the Humber. On all sides we see the influx from the country into the towns, the depopulation of the country; this last aided by the selfish system of enclosures—the great legalised crime of the age—which deprived the villagers, without compensation, of the rights in the soil that for centuries had been theirs. But the towns, for the most part, were not the old boroughs. London, it is true, maintained its pre-eminence, and Bristol struggled, though ineffectually, to adapt its trade to the new conditions. But Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow, Birmingham, Sheffield, Leeds and Bradford were almost the new creations of the industrial revolution, and of a commerce that more and more turned its gaze away from Europe and the old trade-routes towards the West. Vast as were the growths of population in the towns in the nineteenth century, they but accentuated the results

already accomplished by the industrial revolution in the last thirty years of the eighteenth century. The England of to-day, so far at any rate as its organised life is concerned, is essentially the development of the England of 1780 ; separated from the England of 1680 by a gulf almost as deep and broad as that which divides the England of Charles II. from medieval times.

For the shifting of population from country to town was the least important element in the new England. The inhabitants of the new towns soon showed characteristics, the product of their toil and of their specialised skill, that cut them off from the slow-going, conservative dwellers round some cathedral close or in the southern villages. In many directions we see the cracking and crumbling of the old social and economic structure. Territorial feudalism gave place to the new relations of capital and labour. The new towns, with their teeming life, found the old ideals impossible, and demanded new creeds, new economics, new politics and a new literature. On all sides we see the rise of new problems—the drink question, the need of popular education, and of a reform of the Poor Law, are three instances out of many that will occur to the thoughtful—the result of the new, ill-regulated, unorganised industrialism.

Unhappily for herself, in this hour of revolution,