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Richard Heath

Excerpt

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I.

THE ENGLISH VIA DOLOROSA ;

OR,

*GLIMPSES OF THE HISTORY OF THE
AGRICULTURAL LABOURER.*

B

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THE ENGLISH VIA DOLOROSA.

(1884.)

I.

AN ENGLISH EPIPHANY.

ABOUT the year 680 there lived near the monastery of Whitby a herdsman who knew so little of music and singing that when he saw the harp coming towards him at festival gatherings, he, for shame, rose up, and went home.

Having on one occasion thus left his companions, he withdrew to the stable to tend the cattle. Here he lay down to rest, and dreaming saw a man standing by his bedside, who said, "Coedmon, sing me something;" to whom he answered, "I cannot sing anything; therefore it was that I left my companions and came hither." "Yet thou must sing to me," the visitor replied. "What must I sing?" said the dreamer. "Sing me the origin of created things." Thereupon the herdsman began to sing verses in praise of God the Creator, the words of which he had never before heard. Then he arose from his sleep, and having in mind all that he had sung, he added to the words many others worthy of God in the same measure.

In the morning he went to the town-reeve, under whose authority he served, and told him of the gift he had received, who forthwith brought him to the abbess. St Hild caused Coedmon to sing the poem in the presence of all the learned men in the monastery, to whom it seemed that the herdsman had, from the Lord Himself, received a heavenly gift. So they expounded to him more of the sacred history, bidding him, if he could, turn the words into melody of song, which he did, returning the next morning with another poem. Then the abbess began to make much of and to love the grace of God that was in the man, exhorting him to forsake the secular life and to become a monk. And she

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received him into the monastery with all his, causing him to be taught the Holy History and the Gospel, which he, pondering over, turned into sweetest verse, his song and his verse being so winsome to hear that his teachers themselves wrote and learned from his mouth.

Thus King Alfred relates Bede's story of the inspiration of the Father of English Poetry. The Divine Messenger came and awoke the Soul of this English Labourer in a stable; fitting birthplace for the first cry of the humble representative throughout English History, of the Man of Sorrows and the Acquaintance of grief.

Over its cradle bent holy women like St. Hild, saintly men like the venerable Bede, and godly kings like Alfred the Great.

If twelve hundred years ago an English Labourer was capable of writing poems which would appear the prototype of *Paradise Lost*, what treasures must have lain hid in the souls of the agricultural poor, condemned through all these long ages to ignorance, to heavy labour and grinding poverty: an ignorance, a labour, a poverty ever increasing.

To trace this *Via Dolorosa* is a sad work; but the poet will come who will find in it the material not only of a *Paradise Lost*, but of a *Paradise Regained*, for if he has to tell how this great mute Soul was made an offering for National wrong-doing and has to describe its suffering even unto death, he will have the joy of singing its resurrection, an event accomplished in our own day.

II.

IN WORSE THAN EGYPTIAN BONDAGE.

THOSE crouching figures that we see sometimes supporting the roof of a great building are fit emblems of the vast mass of the European peoples during the Middle Ages. Both in the lands under Roman and under Teutonic law, the great majority were in a state of slavery. Among the Saxons the landless man must belong to somebody, or he had no legal existence; he became an outlaw, and anyone might slay him.

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This servile condition rendered him the man of his lord; he could be bought and sold together with his family and his goods and chattels; he could not marry nor give his daughter in marriage without permission of the lord; a serf, in fact, was so entirely at the mercy of his master, that where the latter had judicial authority he could torture his serf and put him to death. Outside the manor-house stood the dreadful symbols of his power: the gallows whereon to hang the men, the pit wherein to drown the women.

Nevertheless a serf could, saving his lord's right, possess property; and there must have been a certain limit to the torture that could be inflicted, since the German law fixed the highest number of blows a slave could receive at two hundred and twenty. When it was his fate to have a good master, existence was not intolerable; but under a bad one, or in times of anarchy, human imagination could hardly outstrip the fiendish cruelty of his tyrants.

The process by which the fat kine eat up the lean kine had been going on in England long before the Conquest, the old Saxon freeman losing ground before the new noble class. The Norman Conquest drove him down still lower, levelling into one common condition of serfdom, the *ceorles* and *thrælls* on the confiscated estates. The old order, however, was not swept away everywhere. Sir Henry Maine seems to think that the Village Community which arose out of relationship and the common possession of a tract of land maintained itself in England through all the revolutions of the feudal system.

This primeval communism which secured its members in the enjoyment of a certain degree of liberty, equality, and fraternity was continually broken up and lessened in its area by the ravages of the banditti, who, step by step, had founded another social system. That the Norman rulers were capable of anything, we may learn from the well-known passage in the Saxon Chronicle, describing the atrocities practised on the people by some of the barons in the reign of Stephen, and by the fact that, in 1102, the Synod of Westminster, over which Anslem presided, denounced "the wicked trade of selling men like brute beasts, which had," they said, "hitherto been the common custom."

Under the Normans all except the higher classes of villeins

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whose services were limited to seed-time and harvest, were bound to do the work needed on their lord's private domain. By them his land was ploughed, dunged, and dyked, his harvests reaped, his barns filled with sheaves, his stables provided with stubble, his cattle, sheep, and pigs tended, his grain turned into malt, his nuts gathered, his woods cut, his fires kept alive with fuel. A whole army of slaves toiled for him as ploughmen, herdsmen, shepherds, malsters, woodmen, carpenters, and smiths, while the borderers scattered on the edges of the commons were bound to provide him with a good stock of poultry and eggs.

The sole reward for all this labour was the right to existence and protection. The only consolations the labourers enjoyed, were the pleasures in which they could indulge on holidays, or the mystic hopes which the services of the Church inspired. Dwelling in dark cottages made of wattles and daubed with mud, they lived on salt meat half the year, and for vegetables, ate onions, cabbages, and nettles.

How the lords fared we may judge from an account Holingshed has preserved of the Earl of Leicester's expenses in 1313. By that time there were labourers in the country working for daily wages; a thatcher in this same year received 3¼d. a day. If we deduct Sundays and Holidays, such a labourer would have been able to earn about £4 a year; and as the Earl's expenses reached £7,309, less £8, 16s. 7d. given in charity, it appears that the latter spent on his family and people an amount equal to the wages of 1825 labourers. More than half of this went on eating alone, while an idea of the revelry indulged in may be gathered from the fact that the Earl's household drank 371 pipes of wine, and burnt 2,319 pounds of tallow candles as well as 1,870 pounds of Paris candles.

Well might a deep-seated ill-will exist between the oppressor and the oppressed. It comes out in the legendary Vision of Henry I., who one night dreamt that he saw gathered round him a number of labourers bearing scythes, spades, and pitchforks, looking angry and threatening. And reason enough they had, if Walter Mapes, a clerical pluralist, royal favourite, friend of Beket, and author of the "Quest of the Holy Graal," is an example of the feeling with which they were regarded. He would not have a

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serf taught anything. "My soul," he said, "naturally detests serfs, this being my sentiment towards them, circumstances must determine when they are fit to have kindness shown them." It is an English proverb, "Have hund to godsib and stent thir oder hand." (Go about with a dog and clench your fist.)

Nevertheless the labourers could work in hope, for one of their own class, a Carpenter's Son, one who had died the death of a Slave, was held to be Sovereign Lord of this feudal society. The innate royalty of the labourer was thereby acknowledged, the Christian Conscience was on his side.

And so was the course of events. The Crusades, the Rise of Commerce, the French Wars, all worked to pull down the mighty from their seats and raise those of a low degree. The Crusades brought many a baron into pecuniary difficulties, what with the outfit and the expensive tastes he acquired; so that he was glad to get out of embarrassment by selling his serfs their liberty. The rise of Commerce created great towns, and towns obtained markets at which the toilers sold their produce and thus obtained the means to purchase freedom.

The change, however, came so gradually that serfdom was a possible condition for Englishmen even in Tudor times. But the revolution had commenced three hundred years earlier, so that by the close of the thirteenth century there was a large class of serfs who had been able to commute their services into money payments, and in the fourteenth century working for wages had become common.

III.

THE PLOUGHMAN PROPHECY.

THE Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman would be well-nigh as popular to-day as it was in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries if the language had not become archaic, for there is no book more thoroughly English in the best sense, none that better expresses the genius of the English labourer.

Langland's aim, however, was not to delineate the labourer but

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to expose the corruptions which were destroying the State, and he sought its reform by trying to arouse in its various members a determination to do their duty in that station of life to which God had called them. But there was only one upon whom he could look with satisfaction: the hardworking husbandman; the others, and above all those whose office it was to guide the people into the highest truth, being given over to selfishness and hypocrisy.

To the labouring class he pointed, not only as an example of life, but as the only one which at that difficult crisis had light enough to guide the rest, and accordingly Piers the Plowman is represented as occupying in relation to England very much the position of one of the Prophets in the old Hebrew Commonwealth. In the midst of a world in which all manner of men are working and wandering with no other reward for their pains but that of finding themselves prisoners in the Castle of Care, Piers the Plowman is ready and willing to lead them into the Truth. Saturated through and through with the thoughts that gave rise to Lollardism, social and religious, he is no mere leveller. He accepts the constitution of things into which he has been born; the king is to rule, the bishop to guide, the knight to defend, while he is to labour for the common weal. But this constitution of things he looks upon as implying a mutual covenant. When a knight tells him that he will try to do as he has been taught, Piers replies,—

“Ye profre yow so faire
That I shall swynke and swete and sow for us bothe,
And other laboures do for thi love al my lyf-tyme,
In covenant that thou kepe holikirke and myselve
Fro wastoures and fro wikked men that this world struyeth.”

This idea of a mutual covenant was as revolutionary as Wiclif's theory of Dominion. As the latter relieved the Christian conscience from the necessity of obedience to rulers who were traitors to the Suzerain of the Universe, so the former destroyed the right of an undutiful lord over his serfs. In either case the appeal lay to the Individual Conscience and the Common Sense; thus it is that at the very outset Langland shows Conscience resisting the King and supported by Reason.

But the Plowman's theory is thorough; all classes are parties to this covenant, the labourer as well as the knight. Therefore, he

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is continually preaching "hard work" to the "dikeres and the delveres" and other workmen on the land; and is ceaseless in the expression of his abomination of idle and lazy vagabonds who waste what others win; and he has no toleration for beggars, especially of the canting sort, who array themselves as "heremites" and "freres," "aneres" and "pilgrymes," who,

"With hoked staves,
Wenten to Walsingham and here wenches after;
Grete lobyes and lenge that lothe were to swynke."

The stern way in which he carries out in his own family this duty of fulfilling by hard work the labourers' part of the covenant, is seen in the names of his wife and children,—

" Dame-worche-whan-tyme-is Pieres wyf highte,
His daughter highte Do-righte-so-or-thi-dame-shal-the-bete,
His son highte Suffre-thi-sovereynes-to-haven-her-wille-
Deme-hem-nought-for-if-thow-doste-thow-shalt-it-dere-abugge (suffer for it)."

Behind this stern exterior he hides so tender a heart that he cannot bear even to see "wastoures wolves kynnes" starving; nevertheless he clokes his compassion in rough words. But his heart once opened, his pity for the miserable idlers increases with every beat, and from letting them "eat with hogges," he soon rises to feeding them on "melke and mene ale." For real poverty his sympathy is unbounded even if they have done evil; let God be the avenger. He has evidently known what it was himself to feel "Hunger at his maw."

For although the labourers' position was rising so fast that they would no longer dine of stale vegetables, and were not even content with penny ale and bacon, but expected fresh meat or fish fried or baked, and that straight from the fire, the husbandman who preferred independence to a full stomach had many a struggle, especially during the month preceding harvest.

" I have no peny, quod peres, 'poletes forto bigge,
Ne neyther gees ne gryes, but two grene cheses,
A fewe cruddes and creem, and an haver cake,
And two loves of benes and bran, y-bake for my fauntis.
And yet I say, by my soule, I have no salt bacoun;

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Ne no kokeney, bi cryst : coloppes forto maken.
 Ac I have percil and porettes, and many kole-plantes,
 And eke a cow and a calf, and a cart-mare,
 To draw a-felde my donge, the while the drought lasteth,
 And bi this lyfode we mot lyve, til lammasse tyme.' ”

All this indicates hard and careful living, and the ploughman's clothes “y clouted and hole,” tell the same tale.

But what is most striking is that a ploughman should have so great a concern for the common weal, and should not only have been desirous to find the Truth for himself, but anxious to guide others to it. This independence of character combined with strong conservative instincts does not suggest a serf or one who had lately emerged from that condition. But in the fact that the Ploughman had not only his “half acre by the highway,” but possessed a little homestead of his own, it seems far more probable that he was a member of one of those rural townships where there were “common fields” and “lot meadows.”

Of course I recognise that Piers the Plowman is continually passing from a real into an allegorical character; but just as Bunyan's “Christian” was a fair type of the best Christians found among the poor in the seventeenth century, so Piers is a fair type of the English husbandman who has never been submitted to the degradation of personal slavery.

The popularity of the book, proved by the many copies extant in a rough penmanship, and still more by the fact that the leaders of the insurrection of 1381 couched their appeal to the country in its phraseology, renders it evident that Langland sketched from life.

IV.

THE LABOURER DEMANDS JUSTICE.

THE stars fought in their courses during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to set the labourer free. Whether Wiclif was the product or the producer of the awakening that during these centuries went on all over the Continent, it would be hard to say,

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certain it is that England was one of the chief springs, if not the spring-head of the movement. It was, as is well known, a movement in favour of a return to primitive Christianity and the regeneration of Europe in harmony with it. It was therefore socialist and democratic, and awakened in the hearts of the population of Europe the memories of a golden age and the promise of the Millennium.

The Black Death in 1349 swept away more than half the population of England. Those that remained soon found that their labour had doubled in value, and the labourer became at once an important person in the realm. Parliament representing only the landlords, accordingly enacted in 1349 and 1350 Statutes by which the Labourer under pain of imprisonment and fines was bound to work at the same wages that he had received before the Plague. These iniquitous statutes acted like goads to the new life stirring in the soul of the English serf.¹

The first Statutes of Labourers having been disregarded, Parliament in 1360 passed a severer law. Instead of three days in the stocks, a labourer refusing to work at the old wages was to be imprisoned for fifteen days. If he fled from his service to another town or county he was to be outlawed and a writ for his recovery to be sent to every Sheriff in England, and if taken he was to have the letter **F** burnt into his forehead for his falsity. Towns harbouring such fugitives were to deliver them up under penalty of Ten pounds to the King and one hundred shillings to the master, an enormous fine when tested by such wages as these statutes allowed: for example, 1d. a day to weeders and hay-makers. This Act of 1360 strictly forbade all combination among workmen.

¹ Sir G. Nicholls, *History of the Poor Laws*, chap. 1, p. 45, agrees that the object of these laws was to restore the expiring system of slavery, a suggestion which Sir James Stephen in his *History of English Criminal Law*, vol. 3, p. 204, admits has much plausibility. Anyone who will take the trouble to read the preamble of the second Statute will soon see how wroth the upper classes were at the thought of losing their thralls. "Whereas," it says, "late against the Malice of Servants which were idle and not willing to serve after the Pestilence without taking excessive wages, etc., an ordinance was passed to which the said servants pay no regard, but considering only their ease and singular covetise do withdraw themselves from Great Men and others," etc.