

CHURCH THOUGHTS BY A LAYMAN

A RAY OF LIGHT ON THE DARK AGES.

THE period usually called "the dark ages," "the middle ages," or, "the mediæval era," serves the same purpose in popular lectures as the obscure ground-work used by portrait painters, who by force of contrast are thus enabled to bring out effects of light and shade they would fail in producing were their pigments spread upon an illuminated canvass. The dark ages, says a brilliant writer, are more fitly styled "dark" because of *our ignorance* concerning them, than because of *their darkness*. He compares us to a sleeper who rises and opens by mistake the glass door of a book case to see if daylight has dawned, and finding all dark concludes the night has not passed! The very word "mediæval" is regarded with superstitious dread by illiterate Churchmen, it is their pet "bogey," superstition being a plant that blooms in the dark. Young urchins who see a turnip lantern although knowing its construction, are nervous at the sight. So some Churchmen, *who at least ought to know better*, become excited when those who love to play upon their weakness, trot forth the turnip lantern of Protestant bigotry and hold up the words "mediæval," "dark ages," in order to enjoy or profit by the alarm they create.

Although the period in question ranges from the fifth to fifteenth century, it is the fashion to confine it to the later two or three centuries before the Reformation—an event itself far more prolonged than is usually thought. We propose to give in regard to this period a statement which is not speculative, nor in any sense controversial. Our authority is Professor J. E. Thorold Rogers, whose remarkable book on "Work and wages" we shall quote freely. The author has examined Manor Rolls, and other papers written in the mediæval era, of which England possesses a store not equalled by any other nation. A flood of light has been thrown upon the dark ages by the study of these documents.

What then do the men of those days tell of themselves and their times? The practice was then universal of drawing up detailed annual accounts, based upon carefully kept statements of household expenditure and stock-taking. The scribe must have been as universal a person as the smith, and the number of persons competent to draw up an elaborate balance sheet, must have been very large. Prof. Rogers says, the prodigious amount of documents penned yearly, and penned precisely, and at nearly the same time of the year, about Michaelmas, proves that education must have been far more widely diffused than is commonly imagined. These accounts were usually kept in Latin, showing that the writers had a sufficient knowledge of that language to keep accounts in it. Now these accounts were kept by bailiffs, house stewards, foremen of works, &c., a class who to-day are rarely able to keep such accounts even in English. On a later page, Professor Rogers affirms that it is a common error to suppose that education in the

middle ages was not generally acquired. We are told that schools were universal. I am convinced that they were attached to every monastery, and that the extraordinary number of foundation schools established after the Reformation of 1547 was not a new zeal for learning, but the fresh and very inadequate supply of that which had been so suddenly and disastrously extinguished—at the Reformation. The Grammar School we attended was founded in the dark ages, as a free school. The great Archbishop by whom it was established, thus expresses his ideas as to its purpose, "To the intent that the young shall be instructed in grammar, music, reading, and because the land produces youths endowed with light and shrewdness, who do not attain the dignity of the priesthood, we have ordained a third assistant master learned in reckoning and writing. The teachers were also bound to teach 'The Words of Jesus—the shortest and surest way to Heaven.'" At New College, Oxford, is to be seen a bundle of accounts of the fifteenth century, proving that the artisans of that day "knew how to write out an account." How very, very few can do this in the 19th century! Even the prize boys of the Public Schools are known to fail in this simple work. A striking proof of the prevalence of education is, that political songs written in those days for the people, were sometimes in Latin, or mixed Latin and English. The eagerness of the Lollards, who were artisans for the most part, to copy and disperse the Bible and other writings among the weavers of Norwich, demonstrates that the "dark ages" were in one respect much lighter than this nineteenth century. That girls were generally educated is proved also by contemporary documents.

Apply another test. In the uprising under Tyler, Sir Robert Sale, the son of a peasant, was pressed to take the lead. A century before this, the son of a peasant, whose name GHOSTETE, is ever to be revered, rose to be a Bishop of the Church of England, and a champion of her liberties. The passage of bright boys from peasant homes to the priesthood was in those dark days, more common than it is to-day. The Manor Rolls of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries abound in entries of such cases. Prof. Rogers urges this as a proof that modern writers are wholly astray as to the condition of the people in the mediæval period.

Look also at another aspect of life in those times. English merchants travelled over Flanders, France, Italy and Germany, and English fairs were largely attended by foreigners from Europe and Asia. The freedom of travel and extensive social intercourse enjoyed, is proved by there ever being a national sentiment evoked by national events. The action of the Pope in John's reign interfering with the universal demands of the people, is the beginning of that deep seated hostility to the Roman court shown in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. England was shaken to its centre by an organized movement among the peasants in Edward's days. Pray, if the people were as barbarous, illiterate,

oppressed, sodden, as certain writers and popular lecturers make out, how came they to organize in defence of their freedom, and for the achievement of higher social and political privileges and rights? At the great fairs held in those dark days, it is known that there were book stalls.

The condition of its industries is good evidence as to the civilization of a country. English peasants were all handy men, just the very men wanted on Canadian farms, they were blacksmiths, carpenters, harness makers, roofers, &c., all combined. *Every peasant owned land* and worked it, hence the profusion of good food enjoyed by the poorest, for it is beyond all doubt that good bread, chickens, ducks, geese, cheese and butter, were the common food of the very humblest Englishman in those days. Every peasant brewed his own beer, which not being hopped, had rapid consumption. All over England certain towns had special industries, showing highly developed skill in manufactures. All classes of artisans had their guilds, combining the features of a trades union with those of a benefit society. Manifestly Englishmen were not the barbarians in mediæval times that their ill-informed censors picture, but were a manly, vigorous, intelligent, skilful, self-reliant, patriotic, pious, and *well fed* race, dangerous to any Pope or King who interfered with the freedom of their homes, their country, or their nation's Church.

Another test is the freedom of the land from agrarian robberies. The middle ages had less crime proportionately than we have to-day, although every man then did brew his own beer! But the secret is this, every person was interested in preserving agricultural property from theft and violence, so universal was the possession of live stock, so ample, so generous, so cheap was the supply of food, that there was no temptation to pilfer. In the thirteenth century, it is certain that every peasant had his pig in the sty, and his fowl in the pot, for poultry keeping was universal, so also ducks and geese. In every peasant's home weaving was carried on. The right of free pasturage on common land was enjoyed in those "dark ages," of which the poor in England were robbed in this marvellous nineteenth century.

The vast size of old parish Churches is in a great measure to be accounted for, by the uses to which their several parts were put in days of old. A mediæval Church was made very large, not as the ignorant fancy, for the purposes of superstition, but for practical utility. The mediæval English were not bores as the eloquent popular lecturer describes them, but long-headed, prudent and shrewd. In associating the Church with all phases of social life they were far ahead of us to-day, and what certain sects imagine to be signs of their being ahead of the Church in this matter, is only a taking up by them of mediæval customs! The parish Church was also the Town Hall, even the market-place of the parish. We have seen large public meetings held in the transept of a parish church, and another transept constantly