

gilds, who were mostly employers on a small scale, made it illegal for those whom they employed to organize. And they discovered very soon that the rich merchants, although robbed of political power, were still masters of the economic situation. It was only through the merchants that the craftsman could obtain his raw materials or dispose of his finished product. Democracy had failed to produce the material advantages which were expected from it ; and it fell out of favour when the first flush of enthusiasm for the new political creed had passed away. Democracy was indeed impracticable in a society of which the structure was essentially capitalist and aristocratic. Ghent and Bruges were no more fitted to be democracies than was the Republic of Venice, which rose to greatness and decayed contemporaneously with them. None the less is honour due to the Flemish burghers for a bold political experiment, which was all the more honourable to them because it anticipated by some centuries the natural course of social evolution. At all events they share with the Swiss cantons the credit for reviving the idea of political freedom when it was in danger of dying altogether. From the battles of Courtrai and Morgarten we may date the birth of the Third Estate as a factor in European politics.

This democratic movement of the fourteenth century illustrates one side, the political side, of Flemish idealism. It was a movement which was coloured and indeed disfigured by an intensely localized patriotism, which understood by freedom little more than the assertion of municipal independence, which made the citizen of Bruges or Ghent even more anxious to humble other Flemish cities than to reform his own. This local patriotism it was which made the Belgian Netherlands so defenceless against French and Austrian and Spanish