

THE AGES OF FAITH.

A CHRONICLER writing in the reign of Henry VI., of England, says: "The men of this land are rich, having abundance of gold and silver, and other things necessary for the maintenance of man's life; they drink no water, unless it be that some from devotion, and upon a zeal for penance, do abstain from other drink; they eat plentifully of all kinds of fish and flesh; they wear fine woollen cloth in all their apparel; they have great store of huselments and implements of household; they are plentifully furnished with all implements of husbandry, and all other things that are requisite to the accomplishment of a quiet life according to their estates and degrees."

Sir John Fortescue here gives us a view of the mediæval era to which we are accustomed. He shows it to us in its prosperity. He reminds us that the life of the Middle Ages was not all gloomy and terrible, if grand or picturesque; that it had other features besides dungeons and racks and frowning castles, tyrannical lords who waged perpetual war, and abject serfs too spiritless for complaint; in fact, that the Middle Ages, taken in their broadest sense, from the Fall of the Roman Empire to the era ushered in by the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, form a many-sided picture, full of life and movement, of grace and animation, of beauty and heroism, of struggle and high achievement. There may be a dark and lurid background; there may be blot upon the canvas which cause us of the nineteenth century to rejoice that the colors on our palette are of less glaring tone. But we can learn much by looking backward, and the retrospection is always full of interests.

The mediæval life was one of associations. There were many pious associations, of nobles and peasants alike, to visit the sick, to bury the dead, to redeem captives or to free slaves. Certain Lombards, banished into Germany, bound themselves to a religious life, which was to consist in the exact performance of manual labor. They were at first all laymen, and were called the Umiliate. The merchants of Paris, in 1170, banded together to obtain the blessing of God upon their enterprises. This was a frequent practice. Officers of justice, and notaries formed themselves into associations. Every trade had its guild, united under a patron saint. Upon the feast of this patron, the members marched in a body to church, where they had a solemn service.

The history of these guilds is most interesting. Their rules were of an exceedingly stringent character. A member found guilty of dishonesty or crime of any sort was immediately dismissed from the fraternity. Trafficking on Sundays or holydays was forbidden, even where the associate lived amongst Jews and pagans. All were required to rest a certain time after each meal, and were hindered from working either too late or too early. Illegitimacy of birth was an obstacle to admission into the guilds; so that the Bastard of Orleans, the deliverer of his country, with his *buton* of field-marshal, was refused membership. These associations often figured as patrons of learning, offering a prize for the best hymn or poem or ballad. Besides supporting sick members and burying the dead, they gave liberally in charity. Thus the silversmiths are recorded as building a hospital for the aged and infirm, and a home for widows.

Many and great privileges were often granted to these fraternities by kings and nobles; as when the painters were declared free and noble, and the franc archers free from taxes. There was a sturdy independence about these guilds, which commands our admiration; whilst the spirit of faith kept them free from dangerous excesses. The holydays which they observed in common, and the strict observance of the Sunday commanded by their rules, lent them a spirituality far, indeed, from the soulless, and irreligious lives led by many modern working-people, who toil all the week for Mammon, and spend Sunday as though there were no God.

The burgher or citizen class had its own privileges and dignities. In certain cities the citizen had a right to the title of Sire. Sometimes they were authorized to wear spurs or to carry a sword, or could claim the privileges of knighthood. They were a most prosperous class, for commerce was very active in the mediæval period. The Venetian, the Pisan, the Genoese, the English, the Dutch, the Spanish, the Portuguese merchants vied with those of France in extensive trading. At a very early period the study of Oriental tongues had become a necessity in France, on account of the commercial intercourse with the East. St. Louis, the French King, formulated the idea that, from a motive of charity, free-trade with all men should prevail. A curious bit of political economy.

From the dim old days of Clotaire, the Frankish King, comes to us a picturesque and beautiful type of the burgher class. He was the court goldsmith, and had achieved renown by his skill in the working of precious metals. His artistic taste was great; his carvings, upon gold and silver vessels and ornaments, of exquisite delicacy. Apart from all this he had an absorbing passion: it was for the ransom of slaves. When a vessel arrived from Africa, the goldsmith stood upon the shore bargaining for the bondsmen's release; once he even gave portions of his own clothing for their redemption. The poor thronged the street wherein he lived, so as almost to form a blockade; and on Sundays a hundred indigent persons sat at table as the rich man's guests.

The whole of mediæval history, however, bids us admire a charity that was vast and comprehensive, that was all-embracing, and that was undeterred by any obstacles. Every one of the religious orders had its motive in fraternal charity. Men bound themselves by vow to redeem captives or to free slaves, and to toil in their places if need be. They fought the Turk, to free Europe from the bondage that threatened it; but they counted it equally glorious to spend years at the bedside of lepers, to care for the orphan or to give shelter to the homeless. It was a spirit that pervaded society in its entirety. Seldom did a rich man die without his legacy to the poor of Christ, always asking their alms in return—prayers for his soul. Sometimes it was a hundred loaves of bread to be distributed at the market-cross, or a certain number of oxen to be killed at a given place; or it was a hospital or an asylum to be built, where the work of charity would go on to untold years. The benefactions of the monks and the sisterhoods are a too oft-told tale to require mention here.

"There is no doubt," observes a historian, "that the higher classes sympathized more with the people than they have done ever since." Very often the relations between the noble and his vassals were of a peculiarly intimate and affectionate character. The lower orders had their place at all great festivals or merrymakings; none, howsoever lowly their condition, were excluded. A place was reserved for them at the tables of the great; and at tournaments and pageants of all sorts there was room for the display of that "chivalry of humble life." The wrestling matches, the archery contests, and the various other trials of skill, brought the man of low estate to the kindly and admiring notice of the highest in the land.

The following quaint description of the English judges in the time of Henry VI. points at what was expected of one class of mediæval worthies: "I woulde ye shoulde knowe that the justices of England sit not above three hours a day—that is to say, from eight in the forenoon until eleven complete. Wherefore the justices, after they have taken their reflection, do passe and bestow all the residue of the day in the study of the lawes, in reading Holy Scriptures, and using other kind of contemplation at their pleasure. So that their life may seem more contemplative than active. And thus do they lead a quiet life, discharged of all worldly cares. And it hathe never been knowne that any of them have been corrupted with gifts and bribes."

A high standard was, in fact, held up to all men. Lawyers were forbidden to nourish false hopes in their clients, soldiers to engage in unjust wars, merchants to overcharge or adulterate. Everywhere the spirit of religion and the solid principles of Catholic truth and justice guided and directed society. The Council of Toledo decreed that kings should spend a certain time each day in the study of the Scripture and in devout reading; that they must approach the Sacraments frequently, thus giving an example of virtue; that they must refrain from putting unworthy men into public offices; must show mercy when possible; and do justice, when it had to be done, quickly. Such regulations were constantly laid down by councils and preached from pulpits. The king was then the servant of a higher Master, and the humblest monk might remind him that he but held his power from above.

It would be a most interesting study to inquire how far these principles prevailed with the monarchs of the mediæval period. There is little doubt that they compare to advantage with any other class of sovereigns who have ruled the world. For even where there were great crimes, there was noble and magnanimous repentance, an humble avowal of wrong, and a desire to make satisfaction. Evil, whether in king or peasant, was then known by its own name, and deplored as an offence against Heaven. Chateaubriand declares that "St. Louis, as a legislator, a hero and a saint, is the representative of the Middle Ages."—St. Louis, of whom Voltaire admits that "human perfection could not go farther," and whom Hallam declares to be "the most eminent pattern of unswerving rectitude and Christian strictness of conscience that ever held the sceptre in any country." St. Louis was one of many.

Chivalry, that strange and fascinating creation of an olden time, has furnished us with a host of noble names,—men who were Christians no less than they were knights, who valued their unblemished honour second to their Catholic faith. No young man of that day was ashamed to hear Mass every morning, and to approach the Sacraments openly and frequently; for a knight it was a sacred duty. A Black Prince knelt at the head of his army to hear Mass and receive the Blessed Sacrament before beginning battle. An Alonzo d'Aguiar, a Lord James of Douglas, a Robert Bruce, a Bertrand du Guesclin, an O'Neil, or a Cordova, prayed with the simple fervor of childhood, and proudly made confession of faith.

The candidate for knighthood passed nights in prayer in a church and fasted in preparation for his investiture. He heard Mass and received Holy Communion. His bath was a symbol of purification, and he was clad in a white robe to signify the purity of life expected from him; over this was a red garment, a token that he must be ready to die for the faith. He wore sandals of black, as a reminder of death; while his gauntlets recalled to him the duty of prayer. When present at Mass, a knight always held the point of his sword before him during the Gospel, signifying his readiness to defend it. And being thus Christian, chivalry was, as Hallam declares, "the best school of moral discipline which the Middle Ages afforded. . . . The