

The Peasants Revolt.

This evening I wish to trace the development of certain events which culminated in the great Peasants revolt of 1381.

We have already seen how the evidences of a new world were breaking through the crust of the middle ages, and daring even to make the strongest accusations against the old order, and to set up the most astonishing claims for the new. Perhaps Wicliffe has uttered the idea which expresses the cause of the trouble and suggests the remedy. I know of no sentence which is so full of sound common sense, and so potent for true reform, not only for the 14th century but for the 20th century as this one of Wicliffe which I am about to quote. Against those who claimed to rule by Divine Right, he said, "The right to govern depends on good government; there is no moral constraint to pay tax or tribute to bad rulers, either in the church or in the state; it is

permitted to put an end to tyranny, to
 punish or depose unjust rulers, and to
 resume the wealth which the clergy have
 diverted from the poor." That is a great
 sentence, one of those inspired utterances
~~with~~ ⁱⁿ which prophets have revealed to men
 the divine law. The extent to which
 Michie's teaching was resounded to, confirms
 the assertion that he only read the deeper
 meanings, ~~and~~ ^{of the} ~~most~~ ^{of} his time, and
 expressed in clear cut form every ~~strong~~
 vague stronger ideas that were hovering
 about the horizon of men's minds.
 "The right to govern depends on good
 government said the prophets." So this
 call to arms the people answered.

The gradual evolution of the English
 people, as well as other European peoples, from
 manlike tribes, ^{the so-called barbarian period} to the serfs and vassals of the
 middle ages, had made no provision
 for the development of an industrial

and commercial class of people. As the character-
istics of these people changed, and new activ-
ities ^{gained former power} ~~gained power~~ to the old essentially agri-
cultural and fighting habits, there began to
develop a new class of people. The rise
of cities and towns, as centers for trading
and for the manufacture of such articles
of use as were not the direct product of
the land, served as the entering wedge
which was finally to force its way between
the seign and nobility, and completely
destroy the feudal system. ~~Within these~~
~~cities or boroughs which were given up~~
~~wholly to the interests of mercantile life.~~
The Lord and his knights, still supported by his
serfs remained true to the feudal system, while
the merchant and craftsman came together
in towns of a more industrial and more
active character to engage in trade
and commerce. During the twelfth and
thirteenth centuries, these towns were

granted charter. The following is the charter granted by Henry II. to Southampton. "Henry, King of England, duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, and Count of Anjou, to his reeves and ministers of Southampton, greeting: I ordain that my men of Southampton shall have and hold their gild and all their liberties and customs, by land and by sea, in as good, peaceable, just, free, quiet, and honorable a manner as they had the same, best, most freely and quietly in the time of King Henry, my grandfather; and let no one upon this do them any injury or insult. Witness, Richard of de Humez, constable: Jocelyn de Boliol, at Winchester."

Ann. Llanthomas & Refracts. Vol II P. 9.

In most of these charters there was provision for a "gild merchant", and sometimes this gild merchant seems to have been identical with the municipal government. At

all events the gild merchant is a substantially the embodiment of the trading monopoly of the chartered town. The ordinances and customs which governed these gild merchants are very interesting. ~~In each place~~ They cover customs and regulations concerning trade, concerning social and business conduct ~~of~~ one member of the gild and towards another, they seem to be a chamber of commerce, a board of trade, a city government, and associated charity, all wound together in one organization. They were of great value in developing trade, and commerce, and gradually became of considerable importance in wider activities.

Side by side with the "gild merchants" there grew up the "craft gilds". The earliest mention of a craft gild is in 1130. These craft gilds became very ~~many~~ numerous. In some cases these craft gilds were

entirely under the control of the town, but in others they were to a large degree independent. The Tailors guild at Exeter received its charter direct from the town.

A typical craft guild of the fourteenth century contained three classes of artisans, - masters, journeymen, and apprentices; and in spite of certain inequalities and hardships, the intent of all three classes was identical. The internal economy of such a guild had probably not varied much from that of a much earlier period, but the great influx of labor into the towns had emphasized the distinction between labor and capital, while it was essential that each craft should be so regulated as to provide employment for all its members. Another peculiarity of each craft was its isolation from surrounding fraternities. Thus the men who made bows must not provide arrows for the same; a cordwainer (shoe maker) might

not fetch shoes nor a cobbler make them. Four separate crafts contributed to the making of a finished saddle and bridle; the joiner made the woodwork which was decorated by the painter; the saddler supplied the leather, and the brimer the metal trappings and ornaments."

Drail's Social England. P. 110-111.

Of the great variety and diversity of these craft guilds, there is ample evidence.

In the city of York there were 51 different guilds which took part in Corpus Christi plays in 1415.

These craft guilds of the 14th century are in every respect similar in form and purpose to the labor unions of today. The craft guilds, together with the guild merchants are the organizations through which the claims of the middle developing middle or industrial class were to assert their rights before the ruling nobility.

Into the midst of these conditions there appeared
 a force which changed the outward
 aspect of all English life. The spirit of
 commerce and adventure had taken the
 place of ~~an~~ ^{channels} of trade with the East.
 But of far more the returning merchants
 brought with them the germs of disease.
 The Black Death first appeared in a small
 trading port on the straits of Ketch, on the
 northern shore of the Black sea. By 1348
 In the years from 1348-9 a great plague
 swept over Europe and large numbers
 fell victim to its terrors. It first appeared
 in a small trading port on the straits
 of Ketch, on the north coast of the Black
 Sea, one of the trade centers for the
 commercial activities with China.
 By 1348 the disease, which came to be
 known as the Black Death, was spread
 all over the shores of the Mediterranean
 and in August 1348 it first appeared

in Dorsetshire, England. It raged for about fourteen months, and in that time so reduced the population of England as well as of Europe that not for many years were normal conditions to be observed. A contemporary chronicler writes of it as follows. (Fa) "it began in England, in Dorsetshire about the feast of St. Peter; in the year of our lord 1348. and immediately advancing from place to place it attacked men without warning, and for the most part those who were healthy. Very many of those who were attacked in the morning it carried out of human affairs before noon. And no one whom it nilled to die did it permit longer than three or four days. There was moreover no choice of persons, with the exception, at least, of a few sick people. In the same day twenty, forty or sixty corpses, and indeed many times as many more bodies of those who had died, were delivered to church burial

in the same fit at the same time. And about the feast of All Saints, reaching London, it defrined worry of their daily life, and increased to so great an extent that from the feast of Purification till after Easter there were more than two hundred coaches ^{buried} ~~brought~~ daily in the cemetery which had been then recently made near Smithfield.

It is a conservative estimate to say that from $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ of English population feel victims to this terrible plague.

Thus it happened that unexpected events intervened to retard and at the same time to achieve the interests of English life. The nobility, being defrined of every source of revenue by the death of their tenants, sought to make amends by increasing the hereditary tax. The clergy, finding that there were many more deaths, and few friends raised

the price of their spiritual commodities. The serfs and middle classes were not backward in taking the hint thus thrown out by their leaders. Finding that there were fewer labourers, and seeing that indeed the volubility were very dependant upon the labour of the serfs, ~~the~~ forgotten nine tenths of the population now began to demand higher wages, and greater freedom. A perfectly just and natural thing for them to do in view of the fact that the volubility and clergy had done the same thing.

This demand for more pay came to such a pass that the King saw fit to issue a proclamation in 1550 concerning labourers. In view of the fact that "a great part of the people, and especially of workmen and servants, have lately died in the pestilence, many seeing the necessities of masters and the great scarcity of servants, will not serve unless

they receive excessive wages, and others preferring to beg in idleness rather than by labor to get their living; we, having considered the previous inconveniences,

have upon deliberation and treaty with the feilders, and the nobles and learned men assisting us, with their ~~unanimous~~ ^{unanimous} council ordained; etc." The substance of the entire document is that the laborer shall receive not the same wages as they received before the plague, and labor under better like conditions, upon pain of imprisonment and punishment. But not so easily could the awakened laborer be put down, or we shall see. The relations became worse and worse strained, and disaster seemed possible.

Into this net work of ^{craft} guilds, and of septs who for the moment had gained a new power by increased value of their services, there came the teachers of

new doctrines. It was fertile soil for such ideas as Mill's great declaration that the right to govern depends upon good government.

But there was another prophet who spoke as from the very people themselves, voicing their inner yearnings, and speaking from a nature that beat in unison with the aspirations of the humanity. This was Wm. Longfellow, who in his *Vision of Piers the Plowman*, which is struck even deeper than did Mill's. The first version, the so-called A. text, of this poem appeared in 1862. The bare outline of the poem, which was written in English, gives us a most simple declaration of a most revolutionary doctrine.

The poem opens with a Prologue in which the writer lets his fancy ~~fly~~ take him to a spot in the Trolwen hills where he sees in his dream as he sleeps by the

Rookrich, "a field ^{full} of folk" all busy with
 their various pursuits. This field is situated
 between the tower of God, and the churgen
 of evil spirits. In this first vision of a field
 full of folk, he sees Lady Church who tells
 him ~~that~~ the great treasure of truth, and
 how though ~~low~~ he may reach heaven.

In contact to Lady Church is Lady Meed,
 or Bribery, who is assured by justices
 that all is well. Lady Bribery, that she
 may seem right even compares to a pious
 and offers to glaze a church window
 by way of amendment. The King for-
 gives to many Lady Bribery to conscience.
 But conscience is unwilling, and
 exposes Lady Bribery, declaring that Reason
 will one day rule upon earth. The King
 then orders Reason to be sent for; Reason
 appears, accompanied by wit and wisdom.
 At this moment Peace enters with a com-
 plaint against wrong. Among knowing the

complaint to be true minus our suit and
kindness to his side, by Britany's help,
and offers to buy Peace off with a Present.
Reason remains firm and convinces
the King of his position.

When the first vision ends, he feels to
sleep again and sees Reason preaching
to the seven great sins, who repent and
set out after truth. At this point there
is presented the great woe stroke of
the Poem. The repentant sinners are
seeking after truth, and unable to find
him. Out of their dilemma they must
get, but who is to show them the way? Not
a nobleman, nor Lady Church, nor a
friend, but Pier, the Plowman, who solves
their troubles by setting them to work.

You see the tone of this is much the
same in thought as much, but it is
even more satirical, and written in
such a firm and style as to offend

to the uneducated, but discontented seer
~~entirely dependent on the state~~

Out of the very fields, according to
Longland, is to come the prophet who
by Reason can level the reporting swines
to Luth, and God's tower. It may have
seemed heretical to read Michip's de-
claration that the Right to Govern depends
on good government, but how astonishing
is the teaching in *Piers the Plowman*.
The way to Luth is pointed out, not by King
or by priest, or by Knight, but by the very
most humble laborer. ^{It is the Plowman} The writer of *Piers*
the plowman was a vigorous one who
really understood the truth that great reforms
must look to the discontented and unsatis-
fied for their supporters. He was by no
means a demagogue, as his focus indicates,
but was a true reformer standing upon the
sound basis of truth, and human rights.

the manner of

What mischief and Pious the Plourmen
 did war to bring these great problems
 of importance down to the common
 people, to set them to thinking, and
 discussing and arguing over the
 Divine right to Rule, and the evils
 and abuses of the existing conditions.
 We have already seen how mischief, unable
 to force reform from within the
 established order, gathered about
 himself a few poor priests, who went
 out teaching and preaching to the common
 people, holding meetings in the open
 air, discussing on the corners, pro-
 claiming at every opportunity the doctrine
 of freedom, and bringing to the people
 by word of mouth the teachings
 of the Bible.

An example of the manner in

which these doctrines were propagated
 is found in John Ball, "the good priest
 of Kent" who began his preaching about
 1360, and continued, except for intervals
 of imprisonment, for twenty years,
 to preach to the peasants and yeomen.
 the doctrines of the master of Pre is the
 Plowman. ~~Look~~. The following is an
 extract, "Good people, things will
 never be well in England so long as
 there be milkeins and gentlefolk. By
 what right are they whom we call
 lords greater folk than we? (Or what
 grounds have they deserved it? why
 do they hold us in serfage? If we
 all come from the same father and
 mother, of Adam and Eve, how can
 they say or fence that they are better
 than we, if it be not that they

make us gain for them by our toil
 what they spend in their frills.
 They are clothed in velvet, and warm
 in their furs and their ermines,
 while we are covered with rags.
 They have mine and silver and fine
 bread; we have only oat-cake and
 straw, and water to drink. They
 have leisure and five horses;
 we have pain and labor, the rain
 and the wind in the fields. And yet
 it is of us and of our toil that
 these men told their stories."

With such words, and such ideas
 we John Ball laboring among the
 peasants and yeomen, you may
 say that such teaching has in it the
 seeds of revolution and disturbance
 but it is profoundly true. It was

in the fourteenth century, and it is
 to-day. No state or nation or institution
 can exist, and in peace and safety so
 long as the former fortunate line in
 needless luxury at the expense of the
 toilers. A great building must rest upon
 a solid foundation, and the foundation
 of the state is not solid when its
 workmen, and toilers are living in
 want, poverty, immorality, and
 degradation and ignorance.

There is clear evidence of the
 the fertile soil of discontent and suffering.
 In the course of the twenty-eight years between
 the publication of the H. text of *Leaves of Grass* the
 Plowman and the eventful year
 of 1387, things were going on apace.
 There is evidence to show that the

a large proportion of the fervent population
was organized into secret societies
connected with the craft guilds and similar
organizations. There has been preserved a
letter written by John Bull, ~~to~~ ^{while} in
prison, to the People of Essex, John, the
Shepherd, sometime S. Mary's priest of ~~the~~
York, and now of Colchester, greeteth
well John Tramelan, and John the
miller, and John the Carter; and biddeth
them beware of guile in the town,
and stand together in God's service: and
he biddeth Peter the Plowman go to
his work, and chastise well ~~the~~ ^{his} the
robber; and take with you John the
True: man, and all his fellows, and
ye were; and look sharp and
go ahead and ye were;

John the Miller both good small small,
~~The King's Son of Heaven small:~~

The Kings Son of Heaven shall ~~be~~ for
 for all.

Be ware or ye'll be woe.

Know your friend from your foe.
 And do well, and do better, and flee sin.
Seek ye peace and hold therein.
 And so ~~with~~ biddeth John the Miller
 and all his fellows."

The organization and discontent continued.
 The church and the state did to nothing
 sensible to relieve the conditions. Arrests
 and persecution, condemnation of doctrines
 as heretical, only added wood fuel
 to the fire which was about to break
 out into open rebellion.

In 1377 the already strained relations between peasants and the conservative classes were given one more weight to test its strength by the "law against excesses of the villains." This action was the result of complaints of lords against the revolutionary conduct of the villians. It was a deliberate attempt to re-establish the old system of serfage, and reduce the peasants to still greater submissiveness. The penalty of imprisonment for all excesses of villians was proclaimed.

At last on Nov. 5. 1380 came the pivotal act of Parliament which set fire to the smoldering mass of discontent among the peasants. The war with France with its continual defeats gave rise to heavy expenses. In order to meet these expenses Parliament imposed the device the

fole tax of 12 d. (formerly 4d) on every
 ferm above 15 yrs of age. This came
 especially hard upon the peasants, who
~~not~~ were heavily taxed to the point
 of starvation.

When it came to collecting the money
 after the treaty of peace with France in
 Jan. 1381, the trouble began. By spring
 the whole peasantry of the home counties
 were in insurrection. They were
 headed by the Parish Priests, and ready
 to shed blood in self defence.

As at the same moment the revolt broke
 out in Yorkshire, Lancashire, Suffolk, Essex
 Kent, the tremendous spectacle of the
 downtrodden rising against their
 tormentors and persecutors. I need
 not tell you how ~~Wot~~ ~~Lytton~~ Lytton
 struck down the tax collector for

insulting his daughter, and thus struck the spark that set the smoldering wrath into one great outburst of fiery passion. I need not tell you how they released prisoners, and how on June 13th, 1387, the great multitudes of peasants entered London, seized the tower and killed the arch bishop of Canterbury. Of the bloodshed and the atrocities of those days, it is useless to speak. I but wish to point out the real demand that was beneath this great volcanic eruption. Said the men of Essex to the King. "We will that you free us forever, us and our lands, and that we may never be vowed or held as vassals!" It was the cry, the ^{petition} for freedom. The King answered

"I grant it" to each demand of the
 servants, and satisfied they returned
 to their homes.

But it is with shame that one has to
 think that within two weeks, the King
 of England, who ruled by Divine Right,
 betrayed his promise and issued a
 decree that all tenants, whether villeins
 or free, should render all accustomed
 services as heretofore.

Richard ~~went~~ through Essex and
 Kent with an army of 40000 men,
 overruling all resistance by mere
 brute force. The men of Essex reminded
 him of his Royal promise, to which
 he replied "Villains you were, villains
 you were, and villains you are. In
 bondage you stood once, and that
 put your old bondage into a worse.

But faith and courage does not come
before but force. Grindicobbe one of those
who ~~was~~ ^{more} honored was even more
wise ^{than} the King and noble. His dying
words were. "If I die I shall die for
the cause of the freedom we love now,
counting myself happy to end my
life by such a martyrdom."

In such a manner the great
impulse of the human soul for freedom
first expressed itself in the modern
world. Affirmed by the forgetful
nobles, and affirmed to action by the
tremendous force of plain common
sense. Truth, these forerunners of freedom
shed their blood and made the sacrifice
for the good of the human soul.

For the women they met defeat

because they relied upon the work
of a King, but no power on earth could
long stem the tide of freedom and truth.
All efforts of the King and parliament
to reform and render submissive
these poor servants were futile. That
they might never be called villains
again, they had protested to the King.
By their protest the feudal system
in England was shattered, the old
world left behind, and the first
step in building the new world
was taken.