

[Lecture 3]
The Peasants Revolt
[Late Medieval Period 2, 1381]

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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 Wyclif 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 Wyclif's 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 tithe 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 divested from the poor."¹

That is a great sentence, one of those inspired utterances in which prophets have revealed to men the divine law. The extent to which Wyclif's teaching was responded to confirms the assertion that he only read the deeper meanings of the unrest of his time, and expressed in clear cut form many vague stronger ideas that were hovering about the horizon of men's minds. "The right to govern depends on good government" said the prophet. To this call to arms the people answered.

The gradual evolution of the English people, as well as other European peoples, from warlike tribes, to the social

¹ Lewis Sergeant (1841-1902), *John Wyclif, Last of the School Men and First of the English Reformed*, 1893.

distinction between the serfs and nobles of the middle ages, had made no provision for the development of an industrial and commercial class of people. As the characteristics of the people changed and new activities gained power over the old essentially agricultural and fighting habits, there began to develop a new class or 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 serfs and nobility, and completely destroy the feudal system. While the Lord and his knights, still supported by his serfs, remained true to the feudal manor, the merchant and craftsmen 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 charters. The following is the charter granted by Henry II to Southhampton,

Henry, king of England, duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, and count of Anjou, to his reeves and ministers of Hampton, greeting: I ordain that my men of Hampton 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 du Humet, constable; Jocelyn de Baliol, at Winchester. (Penn, Translations + Reprints, Vol II, P. 9).²

In most of these charters there were promises for a "gild merchant," and sometimes this gild merchant seems to have been identical with the municipal government. At all events the gild merchant "was substantially the embodiment of the trading monopoly of the chartered town." The ordinances and customs which governed these gild merchants are very interesting. They cover customs and regulations concerning

² *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History*, Published by the Department of History of the University of Pennsylvania, Vol. II Series for 1895. This quotation from Vol II, No. 1, p. 9.

trade, concerning social and business conduct of one member of the gild 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 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 gild of the fourteenth century contained three classes of artisans, masters, journeymen, and apprentices; and in spite of certain inequalities and hardships, the interest of all three classes was identical. The internal economy of such a gild 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 man who made bows must not provide arrows for the same; a cordwainer (shoe worker) might not patch 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 lorimer the metal trappings and appointments." (Triall's *Social England*. P. 110-111.)³

Of the great variety and diversity of these craft gilds, there is ample evidence. In the city of York there were 51 different gilds which took part in [the] Corpus Christi play in 1415.

³ H. D. Traill, ed., *Social England: A Record of the Progress of the People*, vol. 2, 1274-1509. Cassell, 1903.

These craft guilds of the 14th century are in many respects similar in form and purpose to the labor unions of today. The craft guilds, together with the gild merchants are the organizations through which the claims of the 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 opened up channels of trade with the East. But apparently the returning merchantmen brought with them the germs of disease. 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 Kerch 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,

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 willed 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 rich 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 pit at the same time. And about the feast of All Saints, reaching London, it deprived many 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 bodies buried daily in

the cemetery which had been then recently made near Smithfield..."⁴

It is a conservative estimate to say that from 1/3 to 1/2 of England's population fell victims to this terrible plague.

Thus it happened that unexpected events intervened to retard and at the same time to advance the interests of English life. The nobility, being deprived of many sources of revenue by the death of their tenants, sought to make amends by increasing the per capita tax. The clergy, finding that there were many deaths and few priests 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 laborers, and seeing that indeed the nobility were very dependent upon the labor 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 nobility 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 1350 concerning laborers.

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 received excessive wages, and others preferring to beg in idleness rather than by labor to get their living, we, considering the grievous incommodities ... have upon deliberation and treaty with the prelates and the nobles and learned men assisting us, with their unanimous council ordained, etc."

⁴ Robert of Avesbury's Account. Reprinted in *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History*, Published by the Department of History of the University of Pennsylvania, 1895, Vol II, No. 5, p. 2.

The substance of the entire document is that the laborer shall receive the same wages as they received before the plague, and labor under like conditions, upon pain of imprisonment and punishment. But not so easily could the awakened laborers be put down, as we shall see. The relations became more and more strained, and disaster seemed possible.

Into this network of craft guilds, and of serfs 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 Wyclif'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, raising their issues, yearnings, and speaking from a nature that beat in vision with the aspirations of humanity. This was Wm. Longland⁵, who in his "Vision of Piers Plowman" struck even deeper than did Wyclif. The first version, the so-called "A text" of this poem, appeared in 1362. The bear 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 take him to a spot in the Malvern hills where he sees in his dream as he sleeps by the brookside, "a field full of folk" all busy with their various pursuits. This field is situated between the tower of God, and the dungeon of evil spirits. In this first vision of a field full of folk, he sees Lady Church who tells him of the great treasure of truth, and how through love he may reach heaven. In contrast to Lady Church is Lady Meed, or Bribery, who assured by justices that all is well. Lady Bribery, that she may seem righteous, confesses to a friar and offers to glaze a church window by way of amendment. The King proposes to marry 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,

⁵ William Longland (1332-1386), author of the poem "The Vision of Piers Plowman," written approximately 1362.

accompanied by Wit and Wisdom. At this moment Peace enters with a complaint against Wrong. Wrong, knowing the complaint to be true wins over Wit and Wisdom to his side, by Bribery's help, and offers to buy Peace off with a Present. Reason remains firm and convinces the King of his position.

Thus the first vision ends. He falls 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 master-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 priest, but Piers, the Plowman, who solves their troubles by setting them to work.

You see the tone of this is much the same in thought as Wyclif, but it is even more radical, and written in such a form and style as to appeal to the uneducated, but discontented serfs. Out of the very fields, according to Longland, is to come the prophet who, by Reason, can lead the repenting sinners to Truth, and God's heaven. It may have seemed heretical to read Wyclif's declaration that the right to govern depends on good government, but how astonishing is the teaching in Piers the Plowman. The way to Truth is pointed out, not by King or priest, or by Knight, but by the very most humble laborer, Piers the Plowman. The writer of Piers the Plowman was a sagacious one who really understood the truth that great reforms must look to the discontented and unsatisfied for their supporters. He was by no means a demagogue, as his poems indicate, but was a true reformer standing upon the sound basis of truth, and human rights.

What Wyclif and the writer of Piers the Plowman did was 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 Wyclif, 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,

proclaiming at every opportunity the doctrines 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 Jahn Ball⁶, "the mad 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 writer of *Piers the Plowman*. The following is an extract:

Good people, things will never be well in England so long as there be villains and gentlefolk. By what right are they whom we call lords greater folk than we? On 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 prove 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 pride. They are clothed in velvet, and warm in their furs and their ermines, while we are covered with rags. They have wine and spices and fine bread; we have only oatcake and straw, and water to drink. They have leisure and fine 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 hold their estate.⁷

With such words and such ideas was 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 today. No state, no nation, no institution can exist, in peace and safety so long as the more fortunate live 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.

⁶ John Ball (c. 1338-1381).

⁷ Earl Davis gives no source for this quote, but a likely source is H. de B. Gibbins, *Industry in England: Historical Outlines*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906. p. 163.

These ideas were falling upon the fertile soil of discontent and suffering. In the course of the 19 years between the publication of the A. text of "Piers the Plowman" and the eventful year of 1381, things were going on apace. There is evidence to show that a large proportion of the peasant population was organized into secret societies connected with the craft guilds and similar organizations. There has been presented a letter written by John Ball, while in prison, to the people of Essex,

John, the Shepherd, sometime Saint Mary's priest of York, and now of Colchester, greeteth well John Nameless, and John the Miller, and John the Carter, and biddeth him that they beware of guile in the town and standeth together in God's name: and he biddeth Piers the Plowman go to his work and chastise well Hob the Robber; and taketh with you John the True-man, and all his fellows, and no more; and look sharp and go ahead and no more.

John the Miller hath ground small, small, small;

The King's Son of Heaven shall pay for all.

Beware or ye'll be one.

Know your friend from your foe.

And do well, and do better, and flee sin.

And seek ye peace and hold therein.

And so biddeth John True-man and all his fellows.⁸

The organization and discontent continued. The church and the state did nothing sensible to relieve the condition. Arrest and persecution, condemnation of doctrines as heretical, only added more 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 was given one more weight to test its strength by the "law against excesses of the

⁸ Again, Earl Davis gives no source for this quotation. He may have translated into more modern language the version in *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History*, Volume II, No. 5, p. 19.

villains." This action was the result of complaints of Lords against the revolutionary conduct of the villains. It was a deliberate attempt to reestablish the old system of serfage and reduce the peasants to still greater submission. The penalty of imprisonment for all excesses of villains was proclaimed.

At last on Nov. 5, 1380 came the final act of Parliament which set fire to the smoking 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 levied the pole tax of 12 d. (formerly 4 d.) on every person above 15 years of age. This came especially hard upon the peasants who were already 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-defense.

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 Wat Tyler struck down the tax collectors for insulting his daughter and thus struck the spark that set the smouldering wrath into one great outburst of fiery passion. I need not tell you how they released prisoners, and how on June 13, 1381, the great multitude 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 named or held as villains." It was the cry, the petition, the prayer for freedom. The King answered, "I grant it" to each demand of the peasants, 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 villains or free should render all accustomed services as heretofore.

Richard marched through Essex and Kent with an army of 40,000 men, overriding all resistance by mere brute force. The men of Essex reminded him of his Royal promise to which he replied, "Villains you were, and villains you are. In bondage you shall abide, and that not your old bondage but a worse.." But faith and courage does not cower before brute force. Grindcobble, one of those who were hanged, 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 have won, 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. Oppressed by the forgetful nobles, and spurred 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 moment they met defeat because they relied upon the word 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 repress and render submissive these poor peasants 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.