

THE MEANING OF MERRY ENGLAND

(Most of) Chapter viii. of G K Chesterton's *A Short History of England*

'[I]f anybody...I thinks that mere blind luck, without any groping for the light, had somehow brought about the peasant condition in place of the agrarian slave estate, he has only to turn to what was happening in all the other callings and affairs of humanity... [The] system... could no more be produced by accident than one of their cathedrals could be built by an earthquake..'

The mental trick by which the first half of English history has been wholly dwarfed and dehumanised is a very simple one. It consists in telling only the story of the professional destroyers and then complaining that the whole story is one of destruction...

...

[T]he tale told in a book like this cannot really touch on mediaeval England at all. The dynasties and the parliaments passed like a changing cloud and across a stable and fruitful landscape. The institutions which affected the masses can be compared to corn or fruit trees in one practical sense at least, that they grew upwards from below. There may have been better societies, and assuredly we have not to look far for worse ; but it is doubtful if there was ever so spontaneous a society. We cannot do justice, for instance, to the local government of that epoch, even where it was very faulty and fragmentary, by any comparisons with the plans of local government laid down today. Modern local government always comes from above ; it is at best granted ; it is more often merely imposed. The modern English oligarchy, the modern German empire, are necessarily more efficient in making municipalities upon a plan, or rather a pattern. The mediaevals not only had self-government, but their self-government was self-made. They did, indeed, as the central powers of the national monarchies grew stronger, seek and procure the stamp of state approval ; but it was approval of a popular fact already in existence. Men banded together in guilds and parishes long before Local Government Acts were dreamed of. Like charity, which was worked in the same way, their Home Rule began at home. The reactions of recent centuries have left most educated men bankrupt of the corporate imagination required even to imagine this. They only think of a mob as a thing that breaks things—even if they admit it is right to break them. But the mob made these things. An artist mocked as many-headed, an artist with many eyes and hands, created these masterpieces. And if the modern sceptic, in his detestation of the democratic ideal, complains of my calling them masterpieces, a simple answer will for the moment serve. It is enough to reply that the very word 'masterpiece' is borrowed from the terminology of the mediaeval craftsmen. But such points in the Guild System can be considered a little later ; here we are only concerned with the quite spontaneous springing upwards of all these social institutions, such as they were. They rose in the streets like a silent rebellion ; like a still and statuesque riot. In modern constitutional countries there are practically no political institutions thus given by the people ; all are received by the people. There is only one thing that stands in our midst, attenuated and threatened, but enthroned in some power like a ghost of the Middle Ages : the Trades Unions.

In agriculture, what had happened to the land was like a universal landslide. But by a prodigy beyond the catastrophes of geology it may be said that the land had slid uphill. Rural civilization was on a wholly new and much higher level ; yet there were no great social convulsions or apparently even great social campaigns to explain it. It is possibly a solitary instance in history of men thus falling upwards ; at least of outcasts falling on their feet or vagrants straying into the promised land. Such a thing could not be and was not a mere accident ; yet, if we go by conscious political plans, it was something like a miracle. There had appeared, like a subterranean race cast up to the sun, something unknown to the august civilization of the Roman empire—a peasantry. At the beginning of the Dark Ages the great pagan cosmopolitan society now grown Christian was as much a slave state as old South Carolina. By the fourteenth century it was almost as much a state of peasant proprietors as modern France. No laws had been passed against slavery ; no dogmas even had condemned it by definition ; no war had been waged against it, no new race or ruling caste had repudiated it ; but it was gone. This startling and silent transformation is perhaps the best measure of the pressure of popular life in the Middle Ages, of how fast it was making new things in its spiritual factory. Like everything else in the mediaeval revolution, from its cathedrals to its ballads, it was anonymous as it was enormous. It is admitted that the conscious and active emancipators everywhere were the parish priests and the religious brotherhoods ; but no name among them has survived and no man of them has reaped his reward in this world. Countless Clarksons and innumerable Wilberforces, without political machinery or public fame, worked at death-beds and confessionals in all the villages of Europe ; and the vast system of slavery vanished. It was probably the widest work ever done which was voluntary on both sides ; and the Middle Ages was in this and other things the age of volunteers. It is possible enough to state roughly the stages through which the thing passed ; but such a statement does not explain the loosening of the grip of the great slave-owners ; and it cannot be explained except psychologically. The Catholic type of Christianity was not merely an element, it was a climate and in that climate the slave would not grow. I have already suggested, touching that transformation of the Roman Empire which was the background of all these centuries, how a mystical view of man's dignity must have this effect. A table that walked and talked, or a stool that flew with wings out of window, would be about as workable a thing as an immortal chattel. But though here as everywhere the spirit explains the processes, and the processes cannot even plausibly explain the spirit, these processes involve two very practical points, without which we cannot understand how this great popular civilization was created—or how it was destroyed.

What we call the manors were originally the *villae* of the pagan lords, each with its population of slaves. Under this process, however it be explained, what had occurred was the diminishment of the lords' claim to the whole profit of a slave estate, by which it became a claim to the profit of part of it, and dwindled at last to certain dues or customary payments to the lord, having paid which the slave could enjoy not only the use of the land but the profit of it. It must be remembered that over a great part, and especially very important parts, of the whole territory, the lords were abbots, magistrates elected by a mystical communism and themselves

often of peasant birth. Men not only obtained a fair amount of justice under their care, but a fair amount of freedom even from their carelessness. But two details of the development are very vital. First, as has been hinted elsewhere, the slave was long in the intermediate status of a serf. This meant that while the land was entitled to the services of the man, he was equally entitled to the support of the land. He could not be evicted ; he could not even, in the modern fashion, have his rent raised. At the beginning it was merely that the slave was owned, but at least he could not be disowned. At the end he had really become a small landlord, merely because it was not the lord that owned him but the land. It is hardly unsafe to suggest that in this (by one of the paradoxes of this extraordinary period) the very fixity of serfdom was a service to freedom. The new peasant inherited something of the stability of the slave. He did not come to life in a competitive scramble where everybody was trying to snatch his freedom from him. He found himself among neighbours who already regarded his presence as normal and his frontiers as natural frontiers, and among whom all-powerful customs crushed all experiments in competition. By a trick or overturn no romancer has dared to put in a tale, this prisoner had become the governor of his own prison. For a little time it was almost true that an Englishman's house was his castle, because it had been built strong enough to be his dungeon.

The other notable element was this : that when the produce of the land began by custom to be cut up and only partially transmitted to the lord, the remainder was generally subdivided into two types of property. One the serfs enjoyed severally, in private patches, while the other they enjoyed in common, and generally in common with the lord. Thus arose the momentously important mediaeval institutions of the Common Land, owned side by side with private land. It was an alternative and a refuge. The mediaevals, except when they were monks, were none of them Communists. It is typical of the dark and dehumanised picture now drawn of the period that our romances constantly describe a broken man as falling back on the forests and the outlaw's den, but never describe him as falling back on the common land, which was a much more common incident. Mediaevalism believed in mending its broken men ; and as the idea existed in the communal life for monks, it existed in the communal land for peasants. It was their great green hospital, their free and airy workhouse. A Common was not a naked and negative thing like the scrub or heath we call a Common on the edges of the suburbs. It was a reserve of wealth like a reserve of grain in a barn ; it was deliberately kept back as a balance, as we talk of a balance at the bank. Now these provisions for a healthier distribution of property would by themselves show any man of imagination that a real moral effort had been made towards social justice ; that it could not have been mere evolutionary accident that slowly turned the slave into a serf, and the serf into a peasant proprietor. But if anybody still thinks that mere blind luck, without any groping for the light, had somehow brought about the peasant condition in place of the agrarian slave estate, he has only to turn to what was happening in all the other callings and affairs of humanity. Then he will cease to doubt. For he will find the same mediaeval men busy upon a social scheme which points as plainly in effect to pity and a craving for equality. And it is a system which could no more be produced by accident than one of their cathedrals could be built by an earthquake.

Most work beyond the primary work of agriculture was guarded by the egalitarian vigilance of the Guilds. It is hard to find any term to measure the distance between this system and modern society ; one can only approach it first by the faint traces it has left. Our daily life is littered with a debris of the Middle Ages, especially of dead words which no longer carry their meaning. I have already suggested one example. We hardly call up the picture of a return to Christian Communism whenever we mention Wimbledon Common. This truth descends to such trifles as the titles which we write on letters and postcards. The puzzling and truncated monosyllable 'Esq.' is a pathetic relic of a remote evolution from chivalry to snobbery. No two historic things could well be more different than an esquire and a squire. The first was above all things an incomplete and probationary position—the tadpole of knighthood ; the second is above all things a complete and assured position—the status of the owners and rulers of rural England throughout recent centuries. Our esquires did not win their estates till they had given up any particular fancy for winning their spurs. Esquire does not mean squire, and esq. does not mean anything. But it remains on our letters a little wriggle in pen and ink and an indecipherable hieroglyph twisted by the strange turns of our history, which have turned a military discipline into a pacific oligarchy, and that into a mere plutocracy at last. And there are similar historic riddles to be unpicked in the similar forms of social address. There is something singularly forlorn about the modern word 'Mister'. Even in sound it has a simpering feebleness which marks the shrivelling of the strong world from which it came. Nor, indeed, is the symbol of their mere sound inaccurate. I remember seeing a German story of Samson in which he bore the unassuming name of Simson, which surely shows Samson very much shorn. There is something of the same dismal *diminuendo* in the evolution of a Master into a Mister.

The very vital importance of the word 'Master' is this. A Guild was, very broadly speaking, a Trade Union in which every man was his own employer. That is, a man could not work at any trade unless he would join the league and accept the laws of that trade ; but he worked in his own shop with his own tools, and the whole profit went to himself. But the word 'employer' marks a modern deficiency which makes the modern use of the word 'master' quite inexact. A master meant something quite other and greater than a 'boss'. It meant a master of the work, where it now means only a master of the workmen. It is an elementary character of Capitalism that a shipowner need not know the right end of a ship, or landowner have even seen the landscape, that the owner of goldmine may be interested in nothing but old pewter, or the owner of a railway travel exclusively in balloons. He may be a more successful capitalist if he has a hobby of his own business ; he is often a more successful capitalist if he has the sense to leave it to a manager ; but economically he can control the business because he is a capitalist, not because he has any kind of hobby or any kind of sense. The highest grade in the Guild system was a Master, and it meant a mastery of the business. To take the term created by the colleges in the same epoch, all the mediaeval bosses were Masters of Arts. The other grades were the journeyman and the apprentice ; but like the corresponding degrees at the universities, they were grades through which every common man could pass. They were not social classes ; they were degrees and not castes. This is the whole point of the recurrent romance about the apprentice marrying his master's daughter. The

master would not be surprised at such a thing, any more than an M.A. would swell with aristocratic indignation when his daughter married a B.A.

When we pass from the strictly educational hierarchy to the strictly egalitarian ideal, we find again that the remains of the thing to-day are so distorted and disconnected as to be comic. There are City Companies which inherit the coats of arms and the immense relative wealth of the old Guilds, and inherit nothing else. Even what is good about them is not what was good about the Guilds. In one case we shall find something like a Worshipful Company of Bricklayers, in which, it is unnecessary to say, there is not a single bricklayer or anybody who has even known a bricklayer, but in which the senior partners of a few big businesses in the City, with a few faded military men with a taste in cookery, tell each other in after-dinner speeches that it has been the glory of their lives to make allegorical bricks without straw. In another case we shall find a Worshipful Company of Whitewashers who do deserve their name, in the sense that many of them employ a large number of other people to whitewash. These Companies support large charities and often doubtless very valuable charities ; but their object is quite different from that of the old charities of the Guilds. The aim of the Guild charities was the same as the aim of the Common Land. It was to resist inequality—or, as some earnest old gentlemen of the last generation would probably put it, to resist evolution. It was to ensure, not only that bricklaying should survive and succeed, but that every bricklayer should survive and succeed. It sought to rebuild the ruins of any bricklayer, and to give any faded whitewasher a new white coat. It was the whole aim of the Guilds to cobble their cobblers like their shoes and clout their clothiers with their clothes ; to strengthen the weakest link, or go after the hundredth sheep ; in short, to keep the row of little shops unbroken like a line of battle. It resisted the growth of a big shop like the growth of a dragon. Now even the whitewashers of the Whitewashers Company will not pretend that it exists to prevent a small shop being swallowed by a big shop, or that it has done anything whatever to prevent it. At the best the kindness it would show to a bankrupt whitewasher would be a kind of compensation ; it would not be reinstatement ; it would not be the restoration of status in an industrial system. So careful of the type it seems, so careless of the single life ; and by that very modern evolutionary philosophy the type itself has been destroyed. The old Guilds, with the same object of equality, of course, insisted peremptorily upon the same level system of payment and treatment which is a point of complaint against the modern Trades Unions. But they insisted also, as the Trades Unions cannot do, upon a high standard of craftsmanship, which still astonishes the world in the corners of perishing buildings or the colours of broken glass. There is no artist or art critic who will not concede, however distant his own style from the Gothic school, that there was in this time a nameless but universal artistic touch in the moulding of the very tools of life. Accident has preserved the rudest sticks and stools and pots and pans which have suggestive shapes as if they were possessed not by devils but by elves. For they were, indeed, as compared with subsequent systems, produced in the incredible fairyland of a free country.

That the most mediaeval of modern institutions, the Trades Unions, do not fight for the same ideal of aesthetic finish is true and certainly tragic ; but to make it a matter

of blame is wholly to misunderstand the tragedy. The Trades Unions are confederations of men without property, seeking to balance its absence by numbers and the necessary character of their labour. The Guilds were confederations of men with property, seeking to ensure each man in the possession of that property. This is, of course, the only condition of affairs in which property can properly be said to exist at all. We should not speak of a Negro community in which most men were white, but the rare Negroes were giants. We should not conceive a married community in which most men were bachelors, and three men had harems. A married community means a community where most people are married ; not a community where one or two people are very much married. A propertied community means a community where most people have property ; not a community where there are a few capitalists. But in fact the Guildsmen (as also, for that matter, the serfs, semi-serfs and peasants) were much richer than can be realized even from the fact that the Guilds protected the possession of houses, tools, and just payment. The surplus is self-evident upon any just study of the prices of the period, when all deductions have been made, of course, for the different value of the actual coinage. When a man could get a goose or a gallon of ale for one or two of the smallest and commonest coins, the matter is in no way affected by the name of those coins. Even where the individual wealth was severely limited, the collective wealth was very large—the wealth of the Guilds, of the parishes, and especially of the monastic estates. It is important to remember this fact in the subsequent history of England.

The next fact to note is that the local government grew out of things like the Guild system, and not the system from the government. In sketching the sound principles of this lost society, I shall not, of course, be supposed by any sane person to be describing a moral paradise, or to be implying that it was free from the faults and fights and sorrows that harass human life in all times, and certainly not least in our own time. There was a fair amount of rioting and fighting in connection with the Guilds ; and there was especially for some time a combative rivalry between the guilds of merchants who sold things and those of craftsmen who made them, a conflict in which the craftsmen on the whole prevailed. But whichever party may have been predominant, it was the heads of the town, and not vice versa. The stiff survivals of this once very spontaneous uprising can again be seen in the now anomalous constitution of the Lord Mayor and the Livery of the City of London. We are told so monotonously that the government of our fathers reposed upon arms, that it is valid to insist that this, their most intimate and everyday sort of government, was wholly based upon tools ; a government in which the workman's tool became the sceptre. Blake, in one of his symbolic fantasies, suggests that in the Golden Age the gold and gems should be taken from the hilt of the sword and put upon the handle of the plough. But something very like this did happen in the interlude of this mediaeval democracy, fermenting under the crust of mediaeval monarchy and aristocracy ; where productive implements often took on the pomp of heraldry. The Guilds often exhibited emblems and pageantry so compact of their most prosaic uses, that we can only parallel them by imaging armorial tabards, or even religious vestments, woven out of a navy's corduroys or a coster's pearl buttons.

Two more points must be briefly added ; and the rough sketch of this now foreign and even fantastic state will be as complete as it can be made here. Both refer to the links between this popular life and the politics which are conventionally the whole of history. The first, and for that age the most evident, is the Charter. To recur once more to the parallel of Trades Unions, as convenient for the casual reader of to-day, the Charter of a Guild roughly corresponded to that 'recognition' for which the railwaymen and other trades unionists asked some years ago, without success. By this they had the authority of the King, the central or national government ; and this was of great moral weight with mediaevals, who always conceived of freedom as a positive status, not as a negative escape : they had none of the modern romanticism which makes liberty akin to loneliness. Their view remains in the phrase about giving a man the freedom of a city : they had no desire to give him the freedom of a wilderness. To say that they had also the authority of the Church is something of an understatement ; for religion ran like a rich thread through the rude tapestry of these popular things while they were still merely popular ; and many a trade society must have had a patron saint long before it had a royal seal. The other point is that it was from these municipal groups already in existence that the first men were chosen for the largest and perhaps the last of the great mediaeval experiments : the Parliament.

We have all read at school that Simon de Montfort and Edward I., when they first summoned Commons to council, chiefly as advisers on local taxation, called 'two burgesses' from every town. If we had read a little more closely, those simple words would have given away the whole secret of the lost mediaeval civilisation. We had only to ask what burgesses were, and whether they grew on trees. We should immediately have discovered that England was full of little parliaments, out of which the great parliament was made. And if it be a matter of wonder that the great council (still called in quaint archaism by its old title of the House of Commons) is only one of these popular or elective corporations of which we hear much in our books of history, the explanation, I fear, is simple and a little sad. It is that the Parliament was the one among these mediaeval creations which ultimately consented to betray and to destroy the rest.
