

THE MONK AND THE WOMAN.

It will be generally acknowledged as a true statement that there is no time when political danger is so imminent as during the period of great national change. This proposition, which is so trite and well-known in reference to the individual State or people, is even more correct in regard to the peril which arises to the welfare of the whole community of nations which border the particular State in which the change is occurring. Never perhaps was this so well marked as at the time when the disintegration of the great Roman Empire had become an accomplished fact. On no particular date can the historian lay his finger and say, This was the end!—that Colossus of nations was so immense, that blows here and fractures there, which would have shattered any frame of less vast proportions, only told gradually and slowly towards its sure decay. But when Rome had parted into its Eastern and Western divisions, when the heart of the Empire ceased to throb forth its strong centralising pulsations of command and order into the far-away limbs and fingers of its colonies and once-subject nations, out of that paralysis of the extremities, out of that senility of law and decrepit military rule, arose the greatest danger to which civilisation was ever exposed—the danger of universal anarchy. The irruption of the barbarous nations threw the world of culture back for centuries; although even this had its good side in giving to the peoples of Western Europe that “iron of the blood” which the northern savages had kept and nurtured, while the luxury born of conquest, of the use of slaves, and of the large estates, had sapped the constitutions and drained the courage of their southern neighbours. The eagles of Rome were screaming no more for war; they had flown back for the last time over Alps and Appennines, and the strong voice of the Legionary echoed no more from the banks of the Tigris to the shores of the Isles of Tin. In the place of the old military rule arose among the abandoned nations a fierce turbulent spirit, a love of bloodshed, a scorn of authority not supported by power, which threatened to crush out every softer impulse and every gentler virtue of humanity. During the time which saw the Ostrogoth and the Visigoth, the Saxon Heptarchy, the Lombards, the Merovingians, and the Norse Vikings, each king and kinglet, chief and noble was as a God to his followers, so long as he led them where blood was to be shed and booty secured. Men seemed to be losing all human feeling in the blood-thirst of the wolf, when amongst them passed small bands of earnest messengers who preached the doctrine of universal brotherhood, the gospel of mercy and forgiveness, and under their courageous teachings the spectral form of anarchy drew back, the threatened chaos of society took a form a shape which grew day by day into more perfect symmetry and more practical organisation, an organisation which has survived the passage of ten centuries, and is visible working among us in our own day. The men who wrought this unity taught that the Pontiff was the Vicar of God, his foot was on the neck of kings, his was the power to bind and loose in heaven and earth and hell. No less claim would have availed; under threats of the terrors of darkness for the unbelievers, and promises of sure reward eternally for obedience, the discordant particles of seething humanity settled and crystallised around the chair of the High Priest at Rome. Scattered into every village, gathered together in every town were the emissaries of the Christian Pontifex Maximus; where the Convent rose, where the monks tilled the lands of the Monastery were centres of law and order, nuclei of industry and good conduct. It may be urged that there is nothing inherent in Christianity as Christianity to have made it such an unifying and organising power, that any strong religious spirit, such as Mahometanism, would have done as much; and such objection is to some extent just. The hand of the Caliph stretched out from Mecca could make its grip shut as hard at Jerusalem or Bassorah as in the temple of the Caaba, and could reach as far as the touch of the successor of Peter; but in considering historical facts we must deal with what was, not with what ‘might have been,’ and it was Christianity which stood in the western breach between

savagedom and the possibility of government. For which let us be glad, and thankful for the beauty of its youth.

The servants of the Church were not only examples of discipline and morality, but possessed another power for good in their celibacy; it is impossible to rate too highly the effect of such celibacy *at that particular time*. The world had seen many priesthoods, had seen the sway of the priests of Babylon and Egypt, of Judaea, Greece, and Rome become stronger and more intolerant each year their nation existed, the people more and more crushed beneath sacerdotal influence until the sword of the invader shone the Gordian knot of trouble and servitude. A little study will show how the arrogance of priestly caste, increasing from father to son and propagated by family traditions, grows into a shape beside which regal pride sinks into insignificance. But in the Christian Establishment was an order of priests recruited from all classes; into the ranks of that priesthood the sons of the meanest could gain admittance; within that order was safety from the famine and sword which sometimes swept the land; there was a constant succession of “new blood”; a strength resulting from the blending of many diverse races, and the absence of that intolerable family pride of priesthood which is the inheritance of a sacerdotal caste. We can hardly imagine the disastrous effect on men which would have resulted had there been a Christian Hierarchy mingling at once the blood of kings and hereditary priests in the veins of certain noble families.

Having said so much in unmixed praise, let us turn to another side of the question, and see how the light faded and the fine gold became changed. If the unity and celibacy of the Church had many and good effects upon the history of men, they had many cruel and unwritten effects upon the position of women. The doctrines of human depravity, the fall of man, and the vileness of all natural instincts made the celibate who would rise to bodily holiness look upon woman as his personal enemy. His teachers brought with them from the East a contempt for the physically weaker sex not wholly undeserved by those Eastern women. If the effect of the use of slaves was degradation for the male slave and effeminacy for his owner, still worse was the result for the female slave and her master. Not only did slavery spread its social cancer, but the massing of the freedmen in cities (where they had been driven by the slave competition in agriculture on the large estates) had its vile consequences. Any man who wished not to be utterly crushed down became a follower of some great noble, and paid in sycophancy for that noble's protection; if the freedman could scarcely call his life his own, the freedman's wife and daughters were at the beck and call of the great lord in a way which made morality impossible. The mixture with the northern barbarians gave not only strength and courage to the men, but a renewed faith in and higher ideal of womanhood, for the sanctity of marriage and the chastity of their women were articles of belief in the Norse and Teutonic tribes. As we read the Eddas, the Niebelungen Lied, and the other old poems and stories which are our legacy from those stormy days, we see indeed that the Northern women had fingers rather too apt to close round the haft of the axe and the hilt of the knife, but then they did not spare themselves, their love of bloodshed or sufferance of it had nothing of the cruel selfishness which made the delicate Roman ladies in the Flavian amphitheatre turn down their dainty thumbs as the death signal for others. The Scandinavian woman was the house-mother, in her own home-domain, man's equal; looked upon with almost religious respect, because in her veins ran the blood of the ‘fighting man,’ and the wife and the mother of the Northern warrior were the wife and the mother of heroes. But the monks, trained in the later Roman contempt for women and the pietist horror of the sex, changed all that. In the quiet working room of the Convent, in rainy days of winter, on drowsy afternoons of summer, when the Brothers were at their missal-painting, or labouring in their tidy garden, when the low murmur of the conversation turned upon the theme of Women, what