

CHARLES KINGSLEY

THE ANCIEN
RÉGIME

Charles Kingsley
The Ancien Régime

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=36094997

The Ancien Régime:

Содержание

PREFACE	4
LECTURE I—CASTE	18
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	31

Charles Kingsley

The Ancien Régime

PREFACE

The rules of the Royal Institution forbid (and wisely) religious or political controversy. It was therefore impossible for me in these Lectures, to say much which had to be said, in drawing a just and complete picture of the Ancien Régime in France.

The passages inserted between brackets, which bear on religious matters, were accordingly not spoken at the Royal Institution.

But more. It was impossible for me in these Lectures, to bring forward as fully as I could have wished, the contrast between the continental nations and England, whether now, or during the eighteenth century. But that contrast cannot be too carefully studied at the present moment. In proportion as it is seen and understood, will the fear of revolution (if such exists) die out among the wealthier classes; and the wish for it (if such exists) among the poorer; and a large extension of the suffrage will be looked on as—what it actually is—a safe and harmless concession to the wishes—and, as I hold, to the just rights—of large portion of the British nation.

There exists in Britain now, as far as I can see, no one of those evils which brought about the French Revolution. There is

no widespread misery, and therefore no widespread discontent, among the classes who live by hand-labour. The legislation of the last generation has been steadily in favour of the poor, as against the rich; and it is even more true now than it was in 1789, that—as Arthur Young told the French mob which stopped his carriage—the rich pay many taxes (over and above the poor-rates, a direct tax on the capitalist in favour of the labourer) more than are paid by the poor. “In England” (says M. de Tocqueville of even the eighteenth century) “the poor man enjoyed the privilege of exemption from taxation; in France, the rich.” Equality before the law is as well-nigh complete as it can be, where some are rich and others poor; and the only privileged class, it sometimes seems to me, is the pauper, who has neither the responsibility of self-government, nor the toil of self-support.

A minority of malcontents, some justly, some unjustly, angry with the present state of things, will always exist in this world.

But a majority of malcontents we shall never have, as long as the workmen are allowed to keep untouched and unthreatened their rights of free speech, free public meeting, free combination for all purposes which do not provoke a breach of the peace.

There may be (and probably are) to be found in London and the large towns, some of those revolutionary propagandists who have terrified and tormented continental statesmen since the year 1815. But they are far fewer in number than in 1848; far fewer still (I believe) than in 1831; and their habits, notions, temper, whole mental organisation, is so utterly alien to that

of the average Englishman, that it is only the sense of wrong which can make him take counsel with them, or make common cause with them. Meanwhile, every man who is admitted to a vote, is one more person withdrawn from the temptation to disloyalty, and enlisted in maintaining the powers that be—when they are in the wrong, as well as when they are in the right.

For every Englishman is by his nature conservative; slow to form an opinion; cautious in putting it into effect; patient under evils which seem irremediable; persevering in abolishing such as seem remediable; and then only too ready to acquiesce in the earliest practical result; to “rest and be thankful.” His faults, as well as his virtues, make him anti-revolutionary. He is generally too dull to take in a great idea; and if he does take it in, often too selfish to apply it to any interest save his own. But now and then, when the sense of actual injury forces upon him a great idea, like that of Free-trade or of Parliamentary Reform, he is indomitable, however slow and patient, in translating his thought into fact: and they will not be wise statesmen who resist his dogged determination. If at this moment he demands an extension of the suffrage eagerly and even violently, the wise statesman will give at once, gracefully and generously, what the Englishman will certainly obtain one day, if he has set his mind upon it. If, on the other hand, he asks for it calmly, then the wise statesman (instead of mistaking English reticence for apathy) will listen to his wishes all the more readily; seeing in the moderation of the demand, the best possible guarantee for

moderation in the use of the thing demanded.

And, be it always remembered, that in introducing these men into the “balance of the Constitution,” we introduce no unknown quantity. Statesmen ought to know them, if they know themselves; to judge what the working man would do by what they do themselves. He who imputes virtues to his own class imputes them also to the labouring class. He who imputes vices to the labouring class, imputes them to his own class. For both are not only of the same flesh and blood, but, what is infinitely more important, of the same spirit; of the same race; in innumerable cases, of the same ancestors. For centuries past the most able of these men have been working upwards into the middle class, and through it, often, to the highest dignities, and the highest family connections; and the whole nation knows how they have comported themselves therein. And, by a reverse process (of which the physiognomist and genealogist can give abundant proof), the weaker members of that class which was dominant during the Middle Age have been sinking downward, often to the rank of mere day-labourers, and carrying downward with them—sometimes in a very tragical and pathetic fashion—somewhat of the dignity and the refinement which they had learnt from their ancestors.

Thus has the English nation (and as far as I can see, the Scotch likewise) become more homogeneous than any nation of the Continent, if we except France since the extermination of the Frankish nobility. And for that very reason, as it seems

to me, it is more fitted than any other European nation for the exercise of equal political rights; and not to be debarred of them by arguments drawn from countries which have been governed—as England has not been—by a caste.

The civilisation, not of mere book-learning, but of the heart, all that was once meant by “manners”—good breeding, high feeling, respect for self and respect for others—are just as common (as far as I have seen) among the hand-workers of England and Scotland, as among any other class; the only difference is, that these qualities develop more early in the richer classes, owing to that severe discipline of our public schools, which makes mere lads often fit to govern, because they have learnt to obey: while they develop later—generally not till middle age—in the classes who have not gone through in their youth that Spartan training, and who indeed (from a mistaken conception of liberty) would not endure it for a day. This and other social drawbacks which are but too patent, retard the manhood of the working classes. That it should be so, is a wrong. For if a citizen have one right above all others to demand anything of his country, it is that he should be educated; that whatever capabilities he may have in him, however small, should have their fair and full chance of development. But the cause of the wrong is not the existence of a caste, or a privileged class, or of anything save the plain fact, that some men will be always able to pay more for their children’s education than others; and that those children will, inevitably, win in the struggle of life.

Meanwhile, in this fact is to be found the most weighty, if not the only argument against manhood suffrage, which would admit many—but too many, alas!—who are still mere boys in mind.

To a reasonable household suffrage it cannot apply. The man who (being almost certainly married, and having children) can afford to rent a £5 tenement in a town, or in the country either, has seen quite enough of life, and learnt quite enough of it, to form a very fair judgment of the man who offers to represent him in Parliament; because he has learnt, not merely something of his own interest, or that of his class, but—what is infinitely more important—the difference between the pretender and the honest man.

The causes of this state of society, which is peculiar to Britain, must be sought far back in the ages. It would seem that the distinction between “earl and churl” (the noble and the non-noble freeman) was crushed out in this island by the two Norman conquests—that of the Anglo-Saxon nobility by Sweyn and Canute; and that of the Anglo-Danish nobility by William and his Frenchmen. Those two terrible calamities, following each other in the short space of fifty years, seem to have welded together, by a community of suffering, all ranks and races, at least south of the Tweed; and when the English rose after the storm, they rose as one homogeneous people, never to be governed again by an originally alien race. The English nobility were, from the time of Magna Charta, rather an official nobility, than, as in most continental countries, a separate caste; and whatever

caste tendencies had developed themselves before the Wars of the Roses (as such are certain to do during centuries of continued wealth and power), were crushed out by the great revolutionary events of the next hundred years. Especially did the discovery of the New World, the maritime struggle with Spain, the outburst of commerce and colonisation during the reigns of Elizabeth and James, help toward this good result. It was in vain for the Lord Oxford of the day, sneering at Raleigh's sudden elevation, to complain that as on the virginals, so in the State, "Jacks went up, and heads went down." The proudest noblemen were not ashamed to have their ventures on the high seas, and to send their younger sons trading, or buccaneering, under the conduct of low-born men like Drake, who "would like to see the gentleman that would not set his hand to a rope, and hale and draw with the mariners." Thus sprang up that respect for, even fondness for, severe bodily labour, which the educated class of no nation save our own has ever felt; and which has stood them in such good stead, whether at home or abroad. Thus, too, sprang up the system of society by which (as the ballad sets forth) the squire's son might be a "prentice good," and marry

"The bailiff's daughter dear
That dwelt at Islington,"

without tarnishing, as he would have done on the Continent, the scutcheon of his ancestors. That which has saved England

from a central despotism, such as crushed, during the eighteenth century, every nation on the Continent, is the very same peculiarity which makes the advent of the masses to a share in political power safe and harmless; namely, the absence of caste, or rather (for there is sure to be a moral fact underlying and causing every political fact) the absence of that wicked pride which perpetuates caste; forbidding those to intermarry whom nature and fact pronounce to be fit mates before God and man.

These views are not mine only. They have been already set forth so much more forcibly by M. de Tocqueville, that I should have thought it unnecessary to talk about them, were not the rhetorical phrases, "Caste," "Privileged Classes," "Aristocratic Exclusiveness," and such-like, bandied about again just now, as if they represented facts. If there remain in this kingdom any facts which correspond to those words, let them be abolished as speedily as possible: but that such do remain was not the opinion of the master of modern political philosophy, M. de Tocqueville.

He expresses his surprise "that the fact which distinguishes England from all other modern nations, and which alone can throw light on her peculiarities, . . . has not attracted more attention, . . . and that habit has rendered it, as it were, imperceptible to the English themselves—that England was the only country in which the system of caste had been not only modified, but effectually destroyed. The nobility and the middle classes followed the same business, embraced the same professions, and, what is far more significant, intermarried with

each other. The daughter of the greatest nobleman” (and this, if true of the eighteenth century, has become far more true of the nineteenth) “could already, without disgrace, marry a man of yesterday.” . . .

“It has often been remarked that the English nobility has been more prudent, more able, and less exclusive than any other. It would have been much nearer the truth to say, that in England, for a very long time past, no nobility, properly so called, have existed, if we take the word in the ancient and limited sense it has everywhere else retained.” . . .

“For several centuries the word ‘gentleman’” (he might have added, “burgess”) “has altogether changed its meaning in England; and the word ‘roturier’ has ceased to exist. In each succeeding century it is applied to persons placed somewhat lower in the social scale” (as the “bagman” of Pickwick has become, and has deserved to become, the “commercial gentleman” of our day). “At length it travelled with the English to America, where it is used to designate every citizen indiscriminately. Its history is that of democracy itself.” . . .

“If the middle classes of England, instead of making war upon the aristocracy, have remained so intimately connected with it, it is not especially because the aristocracy is open to all, but rather, because its outline was indistinct, and its limit unknown: not so much because any man might be admitted into it, as because it was impossible to say with certainty when he took rank there: so that all who approached it might look on themselves as belonging

to it; might take part in its rule, and derive either lustre or profit from its influence.”

Just so; and therefore the middle classes of Britain, of whatever their special political party, are conservative in the best sense of that word.

For there are not three, but only two, classes in England; namely, rich and poor: those who live by capital (from the wealthiest landlord to the smallest village shopkeeper); and those who live by hand-labour. Whether the division between those two classes is increasing or not, is a very serious question.

Continued legislation in favour of the hand-labourer, and a beneficence towards him, when in need, such as no other nation on earth has ever shown, have done much to abolish the moral division. But the social division has surely been increased during the last half century, by the inevitable tendency, both in commerce and agriculture, to employ one large capital, where several small ones would have been employed a century ago.

The large manufactory, the large shop, the large estate, the large farm, swallows up the small ones. The yeoman, the thrifty squatter who could work at two or three trades as well as till his patch of moor, the hand-loom weaver, the skilled village craftsman, have all but disappeared. The handworker, finding it more and more difficult to invest his savings, has been more and more tempted to squander them. To rise to the dignity of a capitalist, however small, was growing impossible to him, till the rise of that co-operative movement, which will do more than

any social or political impulse in our day for the safety of English society, and the loyalty of the English working classes. And meanwhile—ere that movement shall have spread throughout the length and breadth of the land, and have been applied, as it surely will be some day, not only to distribution, not only to manufacture, but to agriculture likewise—till then, the best judges of the working men's worth must be their employers; and especially the employers of the northern manufacturing population. What their judgment is, is sufficiently notorious.

Those who depend most on the working men, who have the best opportunities of knowing them, trust them most thoroughly.

As long as great manufacturers stand forward as the political sponsors of their own workmen, it behoves those who cannot have had their experience, to consider their opinion as conclusive.

As for that "influence of the higher classes" which is said to be endangered just now; it will exist, just as much as it deserves to exist. Any man who is superior to the many, whether in talents, education, refinement, wealth, or anything else, will always be able to influence a number of men—and if he thinks it worth his while, of votes—by just and lawful means. And as for unjust and unlawful means, let those who prefer them keep up heart.

The world will go on much as it did before; and be always quite bad enough to allow bribery and corruption, jobbery and nepotism, quackery and arrogance, their full influence over our home and foreign policy. An extension of the suffrage, however wide, will not bring about the millennium. It will merely make

a large number of Englishmen contented and loyal, instead of discontented and disloyal. It may make, too, the educated and wealthy classes wiser by awakening a wholesome fear—perhaps, it may be, by awakening a chivalrous emulation. It may put the younger men of the present aristocracy upon their mettle, and stir them up to prove that they are not in the same effete condition as was the French noblesse in 1789. It may lead them to take the warnings which have been addressed to them, for the last thirty years, by their truest friends—often by kinsmen of their own. It may lead them to ask themselves why, in a world which is governed by a just God, such great power as is palpably theirs at present is entrusted to them, save that they may do more work, and not less, than other men, under the penalties pronounced against those to whom much is given, and of whom much is required. It may lead them to discover that they are in a world where it is not safe to sit under the tree, and let the ripe fruit drop into your mouth; where the “competition of species” works with ruthless energy among all ranks of being, from kings upon their thrones to the weeds upon the waste; where “he that is not hammer, is sure to be anvil;” and he who will not work, neither shall he eat. It may lead them to devote that energy (in which they surpass so far the continental aristocracies) to something better than outdoor amusements or indoor dilettantisms. There are those among them who, like one section of the old French noblesse, content themselves with mere complaints of “the revolutionary tendencies of the age.” Let

them beware in time; for when the many are on the march, the few who stand still are certain to be walked over. There are those among them who, like another section of the French noblesse, are ready, more generously than wisely, to throw away their own social and political advantages, and play (for it will never be really more than playing) at democracy. Let them, too, beware. The penknife and the axe should respect each other; for they were wrought from the same steel: but the penknife will not be wise in trying to fell trees. Let them accept their own position, not in conceit and arrogance, but in fear and trembling; and see if they cannot play the man therein, and save their own class; and with it, much which it has needed many centuries to accumulate and to organise, and without which no nation has yet existed for a single century. They are no more like the old French noblesse, than are the commercial class like the old French bourgeoisie, or the labouring like the old French peasantry. Let them prove that fact by their deeds during the next generation; or sink into the condition of mere rich men, exciting, by their luxury and laziness, nothing but envy and contempt.

Meanwhile, behind all classes and social forces—I had almost said, above them all—stands a fourth estate, which will, ultimately, decide the form which English society is to take: a Press as different from the literary class of the Ancien Régime as is everything else English; and different in this—that it is free.

The French Revolution, like every revolution (it seems to me) which has convulsed the nations of Europe for the last eighty

years, was caused immediately—whatever may have been its more remote causes—by the suppression of thought; or, at least, by a sense of wrong among those who thought. A country where every man, be he fool or wise, is free to speak that which is in him, can never suffer a revolution. The folly blows itself off like steam, in harmless noise; the wisdom becomes part of the general intellectual stock of the nation, and prepares men for gradual, and therefore for harmless, change.

As long as the press is free, a nation is guaranteed against sudden and capricious folly, either from above or from below.

As long as the press is free, a nation is guaranteed against the worse evil of persistent and obstinate folly, cloaking itself under the venerable shapes of tradition and authority. For under a free press, a nation must ultimately be guided not by a caste, not by a class, not by mere wealth, not by the passions of a mob: but by mind; by the net result of all the common-sense of its members; and in the present default of genius, which is un-common sense, common-sense seems to be the only, if not the best, safeguard for poor humanity.

1867

LECTURE I—CASTE

[Delivered at the Royal Institution, London, 1867.]

These Lectures are meant to be comments on the state of France before the French Revolution. To English society, past or present, I do not refer. For reasons which I have set forth at length in an introductory discourse, there never was any Ancien Régime in England.

Therefore, when the Stuarts tried to establish in England a system which might have led to a political condition like that of the Continent, all classes combined and exterminated them; while the course of English society went on as before.

On the contrary, England was the mother of every movement which undermined, and at last destroyed, the Ancien Régime.

From England went forth those political theories which, transmitted from America to France, became the principles of the French Revolution. From England went forth the philosophy of Locke, with all its immense results. It is noteworthy, that when Voltaire tries to persuade people, in a certain famous passage, that philosophers do not care to trouble the world—of the ten names to whom he does honour, seven names are English. “It is,” he says, “neither Montaigne, nor Locke, nor Boyle, nor Spinoza, nor Hobbes, nor Lord Shaftesbury, nor Mr. Collins, nor Mr. Toland, nor Fludd, nor Baker, who have carried the torch of discord into their countries.” It is worth notice, that not only are

the majority of these names English, but that they belong not to the latter but to the former half of the eighteenth century; and indeed, to the latter half of the seventeenth.

So it was with that Inductive Physical Science, which helped more than all to break up the superstitions of the Ancien Régime, and to set man face to face with the facts of the universe. From England, towards the end of the seventeenth century, it was promulgated by such men as Newton, Boyle, Sydenham, Ray, and the first founders of our Royal Society.

In England, too, arose the great religious movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—and especially that of a body which I can never mention without most deep respect—the Society of Friends. At a time when the greater part of the Continent was sunk in spiritual sleep, these men were reasserting doctrines concerning man, and his relation to his Creator, which, whether or not all believe them (as I believe them) to be founded on eternal fact, all must confess to have been of incalculable benefit to the cause of humanity and civilisation.

From England, finally, about the middle of the eighteenth century, went forth—promulgated by English noblemen—that freemasonry which seems to have been the true parent of all the secret societies of Europe. Of this curious question, more hereafter. But enough has been said to show that England, instead of falling, at any period, into the stagnation of the Ancien Régime, was, from the middle of the seventeenth century, in a state of intellectual growth and ferment which communicated

itself finally to the continental nations. This is the special honour of England; universally confessed at the time. It was to England that the slowly-awakening nations looked, as the source of all which was noble, true, and free, in the dawning future.

It will be seen, from what I have said, that I consider the Ancien Régime to begin in the seventeenth century. I should date its commencement—as far as that of anything so vague, unsystematic, indeed anarchic, can be defined—from the end of the Thirty Years' War, and the peace of Westphalia in 1648.

For by that time the mighty spiritual struggles and fierce religious animosities of the preceding century had worn themselves out. And, as always happens, to a period of earnest excitement had succeeded one of weariness, disgust, half-unbelief in the many questions for which so much blood had been shed. No man had come out of the battle with altogether clean hands; some not without changing sides more than once.

The war had ended as one, not of nations, not even of zealots, but of mercenaries. The body of Europe had been pulled in pieces between them all; and the poor soul thereof—as was to be expected—had fled out through the gaping wounds. Life, mere existence, was the most pressing need. If men could—in the old prophet's words—find the life of their hand, they were content.

High and low only asked to be let live. The poor asked it—slaughtered on a hundred battle-fields, burnt out of house and home: vast tracts of the centre of Europe were lying desert; the population was diminished for several generations. The trading

classes, ruined by the long war, only asked to be let live, and make a little money. The nobility, too, only asked to be let live. They had lost, in the long struggle, not only often lands and power, but their ablest and bravest men; and a weaker and meaner generation was left behind, to do the governing of the world. Let them live, and keep what they had. If signs of vigour still appeared in France, in the wars of Louis XIV. they were feverish, factitious, temporary—soon, as the event proved, to droop into the general exhaustion. If wars were still to be waged they were to be wars of succession, wars of diplomacy; not wars of principle, waged for the mightiest invisible interests of man. The exhaustion was general; and to it we must attribute alike the changes and the conservatism of the Ancien Régime. To it is owing that growth of a centralising despotism, and of arbitrary regal power, which M. de Tocqueville has set forth in a book which I shall have occasion often to quote. To it is owing, too, that longing, which seems to us childish, after ancient forms, etiquettes, dignities, court costumes, formalities diplomatic, legal, ecclesiastical. Men clung to them as to keepsakes of the past—revered relics of more intelligible and better-ordered times. If the spirit had been beaten out of them in a century of battle, that was all the more reason for keeping up the letter. They had had a meaning once, a life once; perhaps there was a little life left in them still; perhaps the dry bones would clothe themselves with flesh once more, and stand upon their feet. At least it was useful that the common people should so believe. There was good hope that the simple

masses, seeing the old dignities and formalities still parading the streets, should suppose that they still contained men, and were not mere wooden figures, dressed artistically in official costume. And, on the whole, that hope was not deceived. More than a century of bitter experience was needed ere the masses discovered that their ancient rulers were like the suits of armour in the Tower of London—empty iron astride of wooden steeds, and armed with lances which every ploughboy could wrest out of their hands, and use in his own behalf.

The mistake of the masses was pardonable. For those suits of armour had once held living men; strong, brave, wise; men of an admirable temper; doing their work according to their light, not altogether well—what man does that on earth?—but well enough to make themselves necessary to, and loyally followed by, the masses whom they ruled. No one can read fairly the “*Gesta Dei per Francos in Oriente*,” or the deeds of the French Nobility in their wars with England, or those tales—however legendary—of the mediæval knights, which form so noble an element in German literature, without seeing, that however black were these men’s occasional crimes, they were a truly noble race, the old Nobility of the Continent; a race which ruled simply because, without them, there would have been naught but anarchy and barbarism.

To their chivalrous ideal they were too often, perhaps for the most part, untrue: but, partial and defective as it is, it is an ideal such as never entered into the mind of Celt or Gaul, Hun or Slav; one which seems continuous with the spread of the Teutonic

conquerors. They ruled because they did practically raise the ideal of humanity in the countries which they conquered, a whole stage higher. They ceased to rule when they were, through their own sins, caught up and surpassed in the race of progress by the classes below them.

But, even when at its best, their system of government had in it—like all human invention—original sin; an unnatural and unrighteous element, which was certain, sooner or later, to produce decay and ruin. The old Nobility of Europe was not a mere aristocracy. It was a caste: a race not intermarrying with the races below it. It was not a mere aristocracy. For that, for the supremacy of the best men, all societies strive, or profess to strive. And such a true aristocracy may exist independent of caste, or the hereditary principle at all. We may conceive an Utopia, governed by an aristocracy which should be really democratic; which should use, under developed forms, that method which made the mediæval priesthood the one great democratic institution of old Christendom; bringing to the surface and utilising the talents and virtues of all classes, even to the lowest. We may conceive an aristocracy choosing out, and gladly receiving into its own ranks as equals, every youth, every maiden, who was distinguished by intellect, virtue, valour, beauty, without respect to rank or birth; and rejecting in turn, from its own ranks, each of its own children who fell below some lofty standard, and showed by weakness, dulness, or baseness, incapacity for the post of guiding and elevating their fellow-

citizens. Thus would arise a true aristocracy; a governing body of the really most worthy—the most highly organised in body and in mind—perpetually recruited from below: from which, or from any other ideal, we are yet a few thousand years distant.

But the old Ancien Régime would have shuddered, did shudder, at such a notion. The supreme class was to keep itself pure, and avoid all taint of darker blood, shutting its eyes to the fact that some of its most famous heroes had been born of such left-handed marriages as that of Robert of Normandy with the tanner's daughter of Falaise. "Some are so curious in this behalf," says quaint old Burton, writing about 1650, "as these old Romans, our modern Venetians, Dutch, and French, that if two parties dearly love, the one noble, the other ignoble, they may not, by their laws, match, though equal otherwise in years, fortunes, education, and all good affection. In Germany, except they can prove their gentility by three descents, they scorn to match with them. A nobleman must marry a noblewoman; a baron, a baron's daughter; a knight, a knight's. As slaters sort their slates, do they degrees and families."

And doubtless this theory—like all which have held their ground for many centuries—at first represented a fact. These castes were, at first, actually superior to the peoples over whom they ruled. I cannot, as long as my eyes are open, yield to the modern theory of the equality—indeed of the non-existence—of races. Holding, as I do, the primæval unity of the human race, I see in that race the same inclination to sport into fresh varieties,

the same competition of species between those varieties, which Mr. Darwin has pointed out among plants and mere animals. A distinguished man arises; from him a distinguished family; from it a distinguished tribe, stronger, cunninger than those around. It asserts its supremacy over its neighbours at first exactly as a plant or animal would do, by destroying, and, where possible, eating them; next, having grown more prudent, by enslaving them; next, having gained a little morality in addition to its prudence, by civilising them, raising them more or less toward its own standard. And thus, in every land, civilisation and national life has arisen out of the patriarchal state; and the Eastern scheik, with his wives, free and slave, and his hundreds of fighting men born in his house, is the type of all primæval rulers. He is the best man of his horde—in every sense of the word best; and whether he have a right to rule them or not, they consider that he has, and are the better men for his guidance.

Whether this ought to have been the history of primæval civilisation, is a question not to be determined here. That it is the history thereof, is surely patent to anyone who will imagine to himself what must have been. In the first place, the strongest and cunningest savage must have had the chance of producing children more strong and cunning than the average; he would have—the strongest savage has still—the power of obtaining a wife, or wives, superior in beauty and in household skill, which involves superiority of intellect; and therefore his children would—some of them at least—be superior to the average, both from

the father's and the mother's capacities. They again would marry select wives; and their children again would do the same; till, in a very few generations, a family would have established itself, considerably superior to the rest of the tribe in body and mind, and become assuredly its ruling race.

Again, if one of that race invented a new weapon, a new mode of tillage, or aught else which gave him power, that would add to the superiority of his whole family. For the invention would be jealously kept among them as a mystery, a hereditary secret.

To this simple cause, surely, is to be referred the system of hereditary caste occupations, whether in Egypt or Hindoostan.

To this, too, the fact that alike in Greek and in Teutonic legend the chief so often appears, not merely as the best warrior and best minstrel, but as the best smith, armourer, and handicraftsman of his tribe. If, however, the inventor happened to be a low-born genius, its advantages would still accrue to the ruling race. For nothing could be more natural or more easy—as more than one legend intimates—than that the king should extort the new secret from his subject, and then put him to death to prevent any further publicity.

Two great inventive geniuses we may see dimly through the abysses of the past, both of whom must have become in their time great chiefs, founders of mighty aristocracies—it may be, worshipped after their death as gods.

The first, who seems to have existed after the age in which the black race colonised Australia, must have been surely a man

worthy to hold rank with our Brindleys, Watts, and Stephensons.

For he invented (and mind, one man must have invented the thing first, and by the very nature of it, invented it all at once) an instrument so singular, unexpected, unlike anything to be seen in nature, that I wonder it has not been called, like the plough, the olive, or the vine, a gift of the immortal gods: and yet an instrument so simple, so easy, and so perfect, that it spread over all races in Europe and America, and no substitute could be found for it till the latter part of the fifteenth century. Yes, a great genius was he, and the consequent founder of a great aristocracy and conquering race, who first invented for himself and his children after him a—bow and arrow.

The next—whether before or after the first in time, it suits me to speak of him in second place—was the man who was the potential ancestor of the whole Ritterschaft, Chivalry, and knightly caste of Europe; the man who first, finding a foal upon the steppe, deserted by its dam, brought it home, and reared it; and then bethought him of the happy notion of making it draw—presumably by its tail—a fashion which endured long in Ireland, and had to be forbidden by law, I think as late as the sixteenth century. A great aristocrat must that man have become.

A greater still he who first substituted the bit for the halter.

A greater still he who first thought of wheels. A greater still he who conceived the yoke and pole for bearing up his chariot; for that same yoke, and pole, and chariot, became the peculiar instrument of conquerors like him who mightily oppressed the

children of Israel, for he had nine hundred chariots of iron. Egyptians, Syrians, Assyrians, Greeks, Romans—none of them improved on the form of the conquering biga, till it was given up by a race who preferred a pair of shafts to their carts, and who had learnt to ride instead of drive. A great aristocrat, again, must he have been among those latter races who first conceived the notion of getting on his horse's back, accommodating his motions to the beast's, and becoming a centaur, half-man, half-horse. That invention must have tended, in the first instance, as surely toward democracy as did the invention of firearms. A tribe of riders must have been always, more or less, equal and free. Equal because a man on a horse would feel himself a man indeed; because the art of riding called out an independence, a self-help, a skill, a consciousness of power, a personal pride and vanity, which would defy slavery. Free, because a tribe of riders might be defeated, exterminated, but never enchained. They could never become *gleboe adscripti*, bound to the soil, as long as they could take horse and saddle, and away. History gives us more than one glimpse of such tribes—the scourge and terror of the non-riding races with whom they came in contact. Some, doubtless, remember how in the wars between Alfred and the Danes, “the army” (the Scandinavian invaders) again and again horse themselves, steal away by night from the Saxon infantry, and ride over the land (whether in England or in France), “doing unspeakable evil.” To that special instinct of horsemanship, which still distinguishes their descendants, we

may attribute mainly the Scandinavian settlement of the north and east of England. Some, too, may recollect the sketch of the primeval Hun, as he first appeared to the astonished and disgusted old Roman soldier Ammianus Marcellinus; the visages “more like cakes than faces;” the “figures like those which are hewn out with an axe on the poles at bridge-ends;” the rat-skin coats, which they wore till they rotted off their limbs; their steaks of meat cooked between the saddle and the thigh; the little horses on which “they eat and drink, buy and sell, and sleep lying forward along his narrow neck, and indulging in every variety of dream.” And over and above, and more important politically, the common councils “held on horseback, under the authority of no king, but content with the irregular government of nobles, under whose leading they force their way through all obstacles.” A race—like those Cossacks who are probably their lineal descendants—to be feared, to be hired, to be petted, but not to be conquered.

Instances nearer home of free equestrian races we have in our own English borderers, among whom (as Mr. Froude says) the farmers and their farm-servants had but to snatch their arms and spring into their saddles and they became at once the Northern Horse, famed as the finest light cavalry in the world. And equal to them—superior even, if we recollect that they preserved their country’s freedom for centuries against the superior force of England—were those troops of Scots who, century after century, swept across the border on their little garrons, their bag of oatmeal hanging by the saddle, with the iron griddle whereon to

bake it; careless of weather and of danger; men too swift to be exterminated, too independent to be enslaved.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.