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Lamennais.

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SOCIALISM, or more properly Collectivism, in one shape or another, is in the air at this time all over Europe. The question at issue between, as Thucydides says, "those who have and those who have not" is, indeed, coeval with the earliest rudimentary forms of society, when snatching was the law in vogue. But it is intensified and exacerbated now by the appalling contrast between colossal wealth at one end of the social ladder, and at the other end utter destitution. Disraeli said, some fifty years ago, "We are two nations in England, rich and poor." The problem to be solved grows daily more and more instant for legislators and philanthropists, or rather for all who think. Although a century yawns between *L'Avenir* of Lamennais and the *Clarion* of to-day, it is worth while to pause for a moment over one who, in his day, if not a deep thinker, was an ardent and eloquent mouthpiece of democracy in France.

Hugues Félicité Robert de[1] Lamennais was born in 1782 in Brittany, and inherited fully the pugnacity, the excitability, the proneness to a pensive melancholy of that hardy race. Now and again in the picturesque imagery which lights up his oratory one stands on the wild coast of Brittany and hears the waves surging against the rocks. He was a voluminous writer. But in these pages it must be enough to fix our thoughts on what is the most characteristic of all that he wrote, "Les Paroles d'un Croyant, etc."[2]

Some are still alive who can recall the stormy days of 1848. when the bourgeois government of "The Citizen King" came down with a crash in Paris. A shudder ran through London when, late one evening, a rumour came, happily not true, that

[1] The prefix of nobility was granted to the father of l'abbé Lamennais by Louis Philippe.

[2] "Les Paroles d'un Croyant." "Une Voix de Prison." "De l'Esclavage moderne." Precedés d'une Étude sur Lamennais, par M. de Sainte-Beuve, etc. Paris: Calman-Lévy.

Guizot had been dragged "à la lanterne." Lamennais was the stormy petrel of the hurricane which swept Louis Philippe from his throne, and shook the foundations of social order far and wide. In his earlier days he had been a loyal comrade of Montalembert and Lacordaire. But as the political ideas of *L'Avenir* diverged more and more from theirs and towards the ideas of '92, estrangement ensued. Smarting under the ban of the Papal Curia, Lamennais raised again the old war-cry of "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité." In 1837 Montalembert wrote of him, in a letter to a friend, as "Le plus dangereux des ennemis de l'Église" . . . "il a souffieté l'Église." "The champion," wrote another of Lamennais' friends, "is become the adversary—the firebrand." But, while reprobating his politics, sometimes as "un égarement," sometimes as "un' apostasie," they add, "c'est un esprit noble . . . il est passionment sincere."[1] There never could be doubt of that; nor of his religious convictions. Even in his most frantic outbursts against "the oppressors of the people," he wrote as a devout Catholic. He was no "Modernist."

Lacordaire could sway by his voice the crowds who flocked to Notre Dame to hear the great Dominican. "Le maudit" had to speak by his pen. It is a remarkable testimony to his eloquence that two men, both representative of modern French literature, neither of them in sympathy with his beliefs—Renan and Sainte-Beuve—eulogized Lamennais, perhaps overmuch, in their prefaces to his writings. He began his career as ultramontane and legitimist; was buried, 1854, in Père la Chaise, without religious rites, unfrocked and excommunicated for his revolutionary writings.

Lamennais' style is characteristic. "Le style, c'est l'homme." In his perfervid rhetoric, a torrent of invectives, worthy of Swinburne, bears him headlong. Quick, broken sentences, like the stabbings of a short sword, save the ceaseless flow of declamation from monotony. What one desiderates in vain is the close

[1] "Le Recit d'un Sœur," i. 96. Par M^me^ Augustus Craven. Paris: Didier et Cie. This book was "couronné" by the Académie.

and careful reasoning, the judicial impartiality, the self-restraint, which alone can untie the knot. One is tempted to say of him, as of Garibaldi, "Gran cuor, piccola intelligenza."

"Les Paroles d'un Croyant" and "Une Voix de Prison" are mere shoutings, a tissue of passionate tirades, now fierce, now pathetic, against "oppression." It is oratory for a mob, an appeal to the emotions, not to the reason. Page after page is fragmentary as the ancient oracles. Like the old Hebrew prophets, Lamennais calls to heaven and earth to redress the wrongs of humanity. Scene follows scene, as in Apocalyptic visions. Each is more lurid and ghastly than the one before. They are incoherent, inconsequential, as the slides of a magic lantern or the fantasies of a fever. There is no attempt at argument. There would have been more meaning in these philippics in the days when a prince-bishop could begin his sermon with "Chretienne canaille!" when a king could speak of war with all its horrors as "Le jeu de rois"; when the nobles of France protested in a formal document against inferior classes being styled their "brothers"; when a famished crowd were told "to eat grass." Faults enough there were in the bureaucracy of Louis Philippe. But to call it "the worst tyranny that the world has ever seen" is preposterous. Lamennais tosses his firebrands about indiscriminately.

"L'Esclavage" is calmer. He describes slavery rightly as destroying the personality. So with Aristotle the slave is "a living implement."[1] But Lamennais, playing on the word "master," applied it to the employer in modern times, and insists that the workman is a slave nowadays. If there were no other difference—and there are many—the fact that the workman is no longer, like the slave in Hellas or the medieval serf, chained to the same place and to the same master, vitiates the comparison. True, in the long run, capital can outlast labour in a strike. But the labourer, if the chances are against him, can take his services elsewhere. Exaggeration defeats itself. "Freedom," he says, "has never been won except by force."

[1] ἔμψυχον ὄργανον.

It was not "by force" that Wilberforce and his friends won the emancipation of the slave. "All laws are bad," he cries, "and all rulers;" as if there had never been a St. Louis on the throne in his own land.

It would be impossible to find in all this fiery eloquence anything like a system. He continually contradicts himself. After vociferating again and again, "Fight for your freedom, fight 'à la morte,'" he ends with the tame and prosaic counsel, "Petition!" He denounces all governments as tyrannical, all laws as concocted by selfish schemers, and yet he glorifies Napoleon, the incarnation of selfishness. He tells us, what is true, that "the aim of government should be the common good of all." Why does he narrow the words to mean one class only? "La suprème volonté du peuple," he says, must be obeyed. But by "the people" he seems to mean, not the whole nation, but what he calls—it is a questionable word—the "proletariat." It is this perverse one-sidedness, this narrowness of sympathy, which weaken the force of what is sound and true in his pleadings. He is for ever appealing to Heaven; but he forgets that his ravings against authority militates against the submission, which he preaches, to the Divine Will. For, though authority of every kind may be abused terribly, lawless, anarchic self-will means a pandemonium on earth. He argues, with Rousseau,[1] that all men are "naturally equal." The huge disparities, not merely between child and adult, but between the clever and the stupid, between naturally good and evil dispositions, make it nearer to the mark to say that nature is essentially unequal.

It is more easy to see what Lammenais was not, than what he was politically. He does not say, with the extreme Socialist, "La propriété, c'est le vol." "Chacun a le droit," he says, "de conserver ce qu'il a." Rich and poor there must be, he admits, to the end of time. He was no Fifth Monarchy man. When he says to the destitute, "Christ vous delivra," he is not dreaming, like the Anabaptists of Munster, of a visible kingdom of Christ on the earth. He was no Luther, propounding a new

[1] At the age of twelve Lamennais was well acquainted with many of Rousseau's writings.

theology; no Savonarola, attacking the iniquities of the Papal court. Kingsley, in "Yeast," sees deeper into the causes of our social inequalities. Mazzini goes deeper into that which is the fount and origin of all social evils, personal slavery to self. Mazzini is ever hopeful. To Lamennais the world, as it is, seems a dismal charnel-house. It would be ridiculous to class him with Tom Paine and the levellers of the eighteenth century in England. A devout believer in Christianity, he writes at times like an Anarchist.

"None but himself can be his parallel."

Lamennais tries to justify his violent language by the appeal to Scripture. But there is nothing in Christianity to encourage the notion of a dead level in the affairs of men. On the contrary, the Word is, "To each his due"—severally, proportionately, with regard to time and place. Christianity reflects and recognizes the ever varying complexity of nature.

But, if the arguments of Lamennais are illogical and unpractical, if his flights of eloquence end too often in a shriek, what is the good of disinterring his memory?

It is an object-lesson, and a very impressive one, in several ways. It shows that noble inspirations, unless practicable, evaporate in air; that the ideal without the actual is useless.

"Vis consilii expers mole ruit sûa."

And yet, own it one must, there is a reality under these hysterical utterances. They are a protest, more needful now than ever, against that cult of material prosperity which, like a black shadow, dogs the steps of advancing civilization, and which arrays class against class, selfish luxury on one side, against selfish grasping on the other. "Convoitise" is the burden of his cry—"Beware of coveting!" Feudal tyranny is long past—the Chartist riots, which some can remember, seem to us less conceivable now—but the rift still remains between rich and poor, still menaces the solidity of the social fabric. Strikes, surely, will cease, the agitator's occupation will be gone, when the vital principle of profit-sharing shall bind Labour and Capital together indissolubly. Then, at last, the rift will be closed.