MODERN HISTORY.

CHAPTER I.

STATE OF EUROPEAN SOCIETY IN THE FIFTEENTH AND SIXTEENTH CENTURIES.

The period at which this History commences,—the beginning of the sixteenth century,—when compared with the ages which had preceded it, since the fall of the Roman empire, was one of unprecedented brilliancy and activity. It was a period very fruitful in great men and great events, and, though stormy and turbulent, was favorable to experiments and reforms. The nations of Europe seem to have been suddenly aroused from a state of torpor and rest, and to have put forth new energies in every department of life. The material and the political, the moral and the social condition of society was subject to powerful agitations, and passed through important changes.

Great *discoveries and inventions* had been made. The use of movable types, first ascribed to a German, of Mentz, by the name of Gutenberg, in 1441, and to Peter Schœffer, in 1444, changed the whole system of book-making, and vastly increased the circulation of the Scriptures, the Greek and Latin classics, and all other valuable works, which, by the industry of the monkish copyist, had been preserved from the ravages of time and barbarism. Gunpowder, whose explosive power had been perceived by Roger Bacon as early as 1280, though it was not used on the field of battle until 1346, had completely changed the art of war and had greatly contributed to undermine the feudal system

The polarity of the magnet, also discovered in the middle ages, and not practically applied to the mariner's compass until 1403, had led to the greatest event of the fifteenth century — the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus, in 1492. The impulse given to commerce by this and other discoveries of unknown continents and oceans, by the Portuguese, the Spaniards, the Dutch, the English, and the French, cannot be here enlarged on. America revealed to the astonished European her riches in gold and silver; and Indian spices, and silks, and drugs, were imported, through new channels, into all the countries inhabited by the Teutonic races. Mercantile wealth, with all its refinements, acquired new importance in the eyes of the nations. The world opened towards the east and the west. The horizon of knowledge extended. Popular delusions were dispelled. Liberality of mind was acquired. The material prosperity of the western nations was increased. Tastes became more refined, and social intercourse more cheerful.

Art, in all its departments, was every where revived at this epoch. Houses became more comfortable, and churches more splendid. The utensils of husbandry and of cookery were improved. Linen and woollen manufactures supplanted the coarser fabrics of the dark ages. Music became more elaborate, and the present system of notation was adopted. The genius of the sculptor again gave life and beauty to a marble block, and painting was carried to greater perfection than by the ancient Greeks and Romans. Florence, Venice, Milan, and Rome became seats of various schools of this beautiful art, of which Michael Angelo, Correggio, the Carracci, and Raphael were the most celebrated masters, all of whom were distinguished for peculiar excellences, never since surpassed, or even equalled. The Flemish artists were scarcely behind the Italian; and Rubens, of Antwerp, may well rank with Correggio and Titian. To Raphael, however, the world has, as yet, furnished no parallel.

The political and social structure of society changed. The crusades, long before, had given a shock to the political importance of the feudal aristocracy, and reviving commerce and art had shaken the system to its foundations. The Flemish weavers had arisen, and a mercantile class had clamored for new privileges. In the struggle of classes, and in the misfortunes of nobles, monarchs had perceived the advantages they might gain, and fortunate circumstances enabled them to raise absolute thrones, and restore a central power, always so necessary to the cause of civilization. Feudalism had answered many useful ends in the dark ages. It had secured a reciprocity of duties between a lord and his vassal; it had restored loyalty, truth, and fidelity among semi-barbarians; it had favored the cultivation of the soil; it had raised up a hardy rural population; it had promoted chivalry, and had introduced into Europe the modern gentleman; it had ennobled friendship, and spread the graces of urbanity and gentleness among rough and turbulent warriors. But it had, also, like all human institutions, become corrupt, and failed to answer the ends for which it was instituted. It had become an oppressive social despotism; it had widened the distinction between the noble and ignoble classes; it had produced selfishness and arrogance among the nobles, and a mean and cringing sycophancy among the people; it had perpetuated privileges, among the aristocracy, exceedingly unjust, and ruinous to the general welfare of society. It therefore fell before the advancing spirit of the age, and monarchies and republics were erected on its ruins. The people, as well as monarchs, had learned the secret of their power. They learned that, by combining their power, they could successfully resist their enemies. The principle of association was learned. Combinations of masses took place. Free cities were multiplied. A population of artificers, and small merchants, and free farmers arose. They discussed their privileges, and asserted their independence. Political liberty was born, and its invaluable blessings were conceived, if they were not realized.

And the intellectual state of Europe received an impulse as marked and beneficent as the physical and social. The scholastic philosophy, with its dry and technical logic, its abstruse formulas, and its subtile refinements, ceased to satisfy the wants of the human mind, now craving light and absolute knowledge in all departments of science and philosophy. Like feudalism, it had once been useful; but like that institution, it had

also become corrupted, and an object of sarcasm and mockery It had trained the European mind for the discoveries of the sixteenth century; it had raised up an inquisitive spirit, and had led to profound reflections on the existence of God, on his attributes and will, on the nature of the soul, on the faculties of the mind and on the practical duties of life. But this philosophy became pedantic and cold; covered, as with a funereal shade, the higher pursuits of life; and diverted attention from what was practical and useful. That earnest spirit, which raised up Luther and Bacon, demanded, of the great masters of thought, something which the people could understand, and something which would do them good.

In poetry, the insipid and immoral songs of the Provençal bards gave place to the immortal productions of the great creators of the European languages. Dante led the way in Italy, and gave to the world the "Divine Comedy" — a masterpiece of human genius, which raised him to the rank of Homer and Virgil. Petrarch followed in his steps, and, if not as profound or original as Dante, yet is unequalled as an "enthusiastic songster of ideal love." He also gave a great impulse to civilization by his labors in collecting and collating manuscripts. Boccaccio also lent his aid in the revival of literature, and wrote a series of witty, though objectionable stories, from which the English Chaucer borrowed the notion of his "Canterbury Tales." Chaucer is the father of English poetry, and kindled a love of literature among his isolated countrymen; and was one of the few men who, in the evening of his days, looked upon the world without austerity, and expressed himself with all the vivacity of youthful feeling.

Such were some of the leading events and circumstances which gave a new life to European society, and created a desire for better days. All of these causes of improvement acted and reacted on each other in various ways, and prepared the way for new and great developments of action and passion. These new energies were, however, unfortunately checked by a combination of evils which had arisen in the dark ages, and which required to be subverted before any great progress could be reasonably expected. These evils were most remarkable in the church itself

and almost extinguished the light which Christ and his apostles had kindled. The church looked with an evil eye on many of the greatest improvements and agitations of the age, and attempted to suppress the spirit of insurrection which had arisen against the abuses and follies of past ages. Great ideas were ridiculed, and daring spirits were crushed. There were many good men in the church who saw and who lamented prevailing corruptions, but their voice was overwhelmed by the clamors of interested partisans, or silenced by the authority of the popes. The character of the popes themselves was not what was expected of the heads of the visible church, or what was frequently exhibited in those ignorant and superstitious times, when the papacy fulfilled, in the opinion of many enlightened Protestants, a benevolent mission. None had the disinterestedness of Gregory I., or the talents of Gregory VII. There had been a time when the great central spiritual monarchy of Rome had been exercised for the peace and tranquillity of Europe, when it was uniformly opposed to slavery and war, and when it was a mild and paternal government, which protected innocence and weakness, while it punished injustice and crime. The time was, when popes had been elevated for their piety and learning, and when they lived as saints and died as martyrs. But that time had passed. The Roman church did not keep up with the spirit or the wants of the age, and moreover did not reform itself from vices which had been overlooked in ages of ignorance and superstition. In the fifteenth century, many great abuses scandalized a body of men who should have been the lights of the world; and the sacred pontiffs themselves set examples of unusual depravity. Julius II. marched at the head of armies. Alexander VI. secured his election by bribery, and reigned by extortion. He poisoned his own cardinals, and bestowed on his son Cæsar Borgia — an incarnated demon — the highest dignities and rewards. It was common for the popes to sell the highest offices in the church for money, to place boys on episcopal thrones, to absolve the most heinous and scandalous crimes for gold, to encourage the massacre of heretics, and to disgrace themselves by infamous vices. And a general laxity of morals existed among all orders of the clergy. They were ignorant, debauched, and ambitious The monks were exceedingly

numerous; had ceased to be men of prayer and contemplation, as in the days of Benedict and Bernard; and might be seen frequenting places of demoralizing excitement, devoted to pleasure, and enriched by inglorious gains.

But the evils which the church encouraged were more dangerous than the vices of its members. These evils were inherent in the papal system, and were hard to be subverted. There were corruptions of doctrine, and corruptions in the government and customs of the church.

There generally prevailed, throughout Christendom, the belief in papal infallibility, which notion subverted the doctrines of the Bible, and placed its truths, at least, on a level with the authority of the schoolmen. It favored the various usurpations of the popes, and strengthened the bonds of spiritual despotism.

The popes also claimed a control over secular princes, as well as the supremacy of the church. Hildebrand was content with riveting the chains of universal spiritual authority, the evil and absurdity of which cannot well be exaggerated; but his more ambitious successors sought to reduce the kings of the earth to perfect vassalage, and, when in danger of having their monstrous usurpations torn from them, were ready to fill the world with discord and war.

But the worldly popes of the fifteenth century also aspired to be temporal princes. They established the most elegant court in Europe; they supported large armies; they sought to restore the splendor of imperial Rome; they became ambitious of founding great families; they enriched their nephews and relations at the sacrifice of the best interests of their church; they affected great state and dignity; they built gorgeous palaces; they ornamented their capital with pictures and statues.

The territories of Rome were, however, small. The lawful revenues of the popes were insufficient to gratify their extravagance and pomp. But money, nevertheless, they must have. In order to raise it, they resorted to extortion and corruption. They imposed taxes on Christendom, direct and indirect. These were felt as an intolerable burden; but such was the superstition of the times, that they were successfully raised. But even these were insufficient to gratify papal avarice and rapacity. They

then resorted, in their necessities, to the meanest acts, imposed on the simplicity of their subjects, and finally adopted the most infamous custom which ever disgraced the world.

They pardoned sins for money — granted sales of indulgences for crime. A regular scale for absolution was graded. A proclamation was made every fifty, and finally every twenty-five years, of a year of jubilee, when plenary remission of all sin was promised to those who should make a pilgrimage to Rome. And so great was the influx of strangers, and consequently of wealth, to Rome, that, on one occasion, it was collected into piles by rakes. It is computed that two hundred thousand deluded persons visited the city in a single month. But the vast sums they brought to Rome, and the still greater sums which were obtained by the sale of indulgences, and by various taxations, were all squandered in ornamenting the city, and in supporting a luxurious court, profligate cardinals, and superfluous ministers of a corrupted religion. Then was erected the splendid church of St. Peter, more after the style of Grecian temples, than after the model of the Gothic cathedrals of York and Cologne. Glorious was that monument of reviving art; wonderful was its lofty dome; but the vast sums required to build it opened the eyes of Christendom to the extravagance and presumption of the popes; and this splendid trophy of their glory also became the emblem of their broken power. Their palaces and temples made an imposing show, but detracted from their real strength, which consisted in the affections of their spiritual subjects. Their outward grandeur, like the mechanical agencies which kings employ, was but a poor substitute for the invisible power of love,— in all ages, and among all people, "that cheap defence" which supports thrones and kingdoms.

Another great evil was, the prevalence of an idolatrous spirit. In the churches and chapels, and even in private families, were innumerable images of saints, pictures of the Virgin, relics, crucifixes, &c., designed at first to kindle a spirit of devotion among the rude and uneducated, but gradually becoming objects of real adoration. Intercessions were supposed to be made by the Virgin Mary, and by favorite saints, more efficacious with Deity than the penitence and prayers of the erring and sinful themselves. The

influence of this veneration for martyrs and saints was degrading to the mind, and became a very lucrative source of profit to the priests, who peddled the bones and relics of saints as they did indulgences, and who invented innumerable lies to attest the genuineness and antiquity of the objects they sold, all of which were parts of the great system of fraud and avarice which the church permitted.

Again; the public worship of God was in a language the people could not understand, but rendered impressive by the gorgeous dresses of the priests, and the magnificence of the altar, and the images and vessels of silver and gold, reflecting their splendor, by the light of wax candles, on the sombre pillars, roofs, and windows of the Gothic church, and the effect heightened by exciting music, and other appeals to the taste or imagination, rather than to the reason and the heart. The sermons of the clergy were frivolous, and ill adapted to the spiritual wants of the people. "Men went to the Vatican," says the learned and philosophical Ranke, "not to pray, but to contemplate the Belvidere Apollo. They disgraced the most solemn festivals by open profanations. The clergy, in their services, sought the means of exciting laughter. One would mock the cuckoo, and another recite indecent stories about St. Peter." Luther, when he visited Italy, was extremely shocked at the infidel spirit which prevailed among the clergy, who were hostile to the circulation of the Scriptures, and who encouraged persecutions and inquisitions. This was the age when the dreadful tribunal of the Inquisition flourished. although its chief enormities were perpetrated in Spain and Portugal. It never had an existence in England, and but little influence in France and Germany. But if the Church did not resort, in all countries, to that dread tribunal which subjected youth, beauty, and innocence to the inquisitorial vengeance of narrow-minded Dominican monks, still she was hostile to free inquiry, and to all efforts made to emancipate the reason of men.

The spirit of religious persecution, which inflamed the Roman Church to punish all dissenters from the doctrine and abuses she promulgated, can never be questioned. The Waldenses and Albigenses had suffered, in darker times, almost incredible hardships and miseries — had been almost annihilated by the dreadful crusade which was carried on against them, so that two hundred thousand had perished for supposed heresy. But reference is not now made to this wholesale massacre, but to those instances of individual persecution which showed the extreme jealousy and hatred of Rome of all new opinions. John Huss and Jerome of Prague were publicly burned for attempting to reform the church, and even Savonarola, who did not deny the authority of the popes, was condemned to the flames for denouncing the vices of his age, rather than the evils of the church.

These multiplied evils, which checked the spirit of improvement, called loudly for reform. Councils were assembled for the purpose; but councils supported, rather than diminished, the evils of which even princes complained. The reform was not destined to come from dignitaries in the church or state; not from bishops, nor philosophers, nor kings, but from an obscure teacher of divinity in a German university, whom the genius of a reviving and awakened age had summoned into the field of revolutionary warfare. It was reserved for Martin Luther to commence the first successful rebellion against the despotism of Rome, and to give the greatest impulse to freedom of thought, and a general spirit of reform, which ten centuries had seen.

The most prominent event in modern times is unquestionably the Protestant Reformation, and it was by far the most momentous in its results. It gave rise, directly or indirectly, to the great wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as to those rival sects which agitated the theological world. It is connected with the enterprises of great monarchs, with the struggle of the Huguenots and Puritans, with the diffusion of knowledge, and with the progress of civil and religious liberty in Europe. An event, therefore, of such interest and magnitude, may well be adopted as a starting point in modern history, and will, accordingly, be the first subject of especial notice. History is ever most impressive and philosophical when great changes and revolutions are traced to the agency of great spiritual ideas. Moreover, modern history is so complicated, that it is difficult to unravel it except by tracing the agency of great causes, rather than by detailing the fortunes of kings and nobles.