

## CHAPTER V.

Combinations of Masons.—Association an English principle.—Domestic Architecture.—Timber houses.—Consumption of Timber.—Furniture and Utensils.—Dearthness and scarcity of Clothing.—Domestic Servants.—Females.—Married life of Females.—Housewifery.—The Clergy.—Their intercourse with the laity.—Curates and Chaplains.—Pilgrimages.—Wills.—Difficulties of Communication.—Letters.—State of Popular Knowledge.—Beginnings of Printing.

If we wanted any proof that the laws for the regulation of labour were for the oppression and not the protection of workmen, we should find it in one brief enactment of 1423: \* "Whereas by the yearly Congregations and Confederacies made by the Masons in their general chapters assembled, the good course and effect of the statutes of Labourers be openly violated and broken, in subversion of the law, and to the great damage of all the commons: our said lord the king, willing in this case to provide remedy, hath ordained and established, that such Chapters and Congregations shall not be hereafter holden; and if any such be made, they that cause such Chapters and Congregations to be assembled and holden, if they thereof be convict, shall be judged for felons; and that all the other Masons that come to such Chapters and Congregations, be punished by imprisonment of their bodies, and make fine and ransom at the king's will." This is hard measure for the class of men who, during three centuries, had covered England with its noblest monuments; and now, in the assemblies where they discoursed of their art, also complained of the oppression that levelled that art to the ordinary condition of unskilled labour. They resisted, as they had a right to resist. They held together, as Englishmen from that day to this have held, when tyranny has tried to break their ranks. Destructive as these class-contests may have been—in most cases unwise and useless for their immediate ends,—they were better than servile endurance of real or fancied wrong. The union of masons, which this law called confederacy, was the principle which has made our nation unassailable from without and strong against oppression from within—the union of family

\* Stat. 3 Henry VI. cap. 1.

of occupation, of locality, of country—the steadfast individual will strengthening itself by association; and learning, in the discordant opinions of deliberative bodies, to moderate the rash and uncertain counsels of the solitary judgment. No real social tyranny could ever endure long in England against this principle. If the combination were inexpedient, the true wisdom of moderation would soon manifest itself. If it were just, no arbitrary legislative interference could eventually put it down. That the masons held their "chapters" in despite of the law of Henry VI. we have no doubt; and that they controlled the bad "course and effect of the Statutes of Labourers" by some compromise, we may be equally assured. It was a building age in England; and the land would not have been covered with improved domestic structures, if the rewards of the artificer had not been proportioned to the demand for his skill, in despite of the attempt to regiment all labour.

The period for grand ecclesiastical architecture was coming to an end. The cathedrals of England were finished. The age of monastic endowment was passed. Henry VI. began the noble chapel of King's College; but it remained incomplete till Henry VII. placed his armorial bearings over the door-way, as if that gorgeous structure had been his sole work. Castles, such as had arisen under the Norman kings,—strong fortresses, but wretched abodes,—were no longer needed, except on the Welsh and Scotch borders. The great proprietors now wanted dwellings that should unite convenience with some power of defence. The baronial lords, whose fathers had gone forth from the dreary keeps in which their armed followers lived in dirt and darkness, now added spacious courts, rich with "fair-compassed windows," within the space protected by the broad moat and the loop-holed tower. The new castles were constructed so as to unite the characters of castellated and domestic architecture. Such was Herstmonceaux, in Sussex, erected in 1448; a spacious parallelogram, with seventeen octagon towers, and a machicolated gateway. The building with brick had been disused for centuries; and this ruined pile is a noble specimen of its revival. In some of these buildings there was the appearance rather than the reality of strength. They would have stood no attacks of cannon; and their battlements were rather for the purpose of defying sudden assaults from marauders and undisciplined bands, than for resisting a practised soldiery, provided with the improved munitions of war. Nottingham Castle, in the time of Edward IV., had become "a gallant building for lodging,"

as Leland describes it; and though licences to crenelate manor-houses—that is, to embattle and fortify them—were common enough at this period, the decorated gable and the handsome oriel window had superseded, in most instances, the protecting parapet and the frowning embrasure. The great hall was still the distinguishing feature of the domestic arrangement; and if the number of lodging-rooms was greatly increased, as compared with the rude provisions of an earlier period, there was small regard to those niceties of domestic comfort which grow with the growing refinements of each successive generation. One of the smaller manor-houses, Ockwells, in Berkshire, is a remarkable specimen of a building of elaborate decoration, in which the hall, with its spacious painted windows, strangely contrasts in its size and beauty with the meanness of the apartments which we reach after having mounted the broad staircase.

The ordinary country dwellings of the proprietary classes were constructed upon the same fashion of an open court, with a hall. They were generally so constructed as to be capable of some defence against attack. There was more apprehension of the forcible entries of disputants for possession, than of public enemies or robbers. A house defended against such assaults is thus described: "Partrick and his fellowship are sore afraid that ye would enter again upon them; and they have made great ordinance within the house; and it is told me they have made bars to bar the doors crosswise; and they have made wickets in every quarter of the house to shoot out at, both with bows and with hand-guns: and the holes that be made for hand-guns they be scarce knee high from the plancher (floor); and of such holes be made five; there can no man shoot out at them with no hand-bows."\* Most of these houses were of timber; and it appears that in some cases they were framed upon the spot where the wood was felled.† In populous districts the demand for building timber was great; and this circumstance, which indicates how certainly the value of landed property is enhanced by the increase of an urban population, added largely to the revenues of the tenants-in-fee. The necessities, however, of the landed proprietors often compelled them to sell at a great reduction of price. "If I should sell my woods now," says Margaret Paston, "there will no man give so much for them by near an hundred marks as they be worth, because

\* Paston Letters, letter lxxvii.

† *Ibid.*, letter xlv.

there be so many wood sales in Norfolk at this time."\* The demand for fire-wood and charcoal for the towns was also gradually thinning the remotest coverts, and making way for the population that was to convert the dense forests into pastures and corn-fields. One of the richest prospects of southern England is from Leith hill, its highest eminence, where the eye ranges from the Downs of the coast to the chalk hills of Reigate, and luxuriates in the variety beneath—corn-lands, meadows, parks, mansions, villages, plantations—but all indicating a tract which man has subdued into fertility. That was once the Weald of Surrey and Sussex—the Coit Andred of the Britons, the Andredes-weald of the Saxons; the immense forest formerly inhabited only by the wild hog and the stag, till the charcoal-burner there lighted his fires, and the iron-smelter built his forge. Before pit-coal came into use—and its value was little known in the fifteenth century—the great central fire of the baronial hall smoked and blazed with billet and brushwood. In the living apartments the broad chimney-piece, beneath which the fuel rested upon andirons, was now made ornamental. Warmth was needed to exclude the blast that came through the ill-fitted doors and shrunken shutters. Hangings concealed the rough plastering of the walls and the "chinks which time had made." The sleeping rooms were small. The good matron, Agnes Paston, is puzzled how she can put her husband's writing-board and his coffer beside the bed, so that he could have space to sit.† This was in their town-house of Norwich, which was probably built of stone; and, if wanting in comfort within, exhibited an architectural taste without, which shames the hideous uniformity of modern towns—the long lines of high brick walls, with holes called windows at regular intervals. The furniture of the houses of the esquire and the yeoman was exceedingly scanty. Beds were rarely used except by the most wealthy; and "a little featherbed" forms a considerable item in a will. A rich householder, John Baret, of Bury, in 1463, bequeaths to his niece "the round table for the term of her life, and after remain to the owner of my place."‡ Common utensils were transmitted from generation to generation; this worthy burgess thus leaving "a great earthen pot that was my mother's." Wives had a life interest in "stuff of household," which was bequeathed to descend, after the decease of the wife, article by article to relatives and friends. The riches so handed

\* Paston Letters, letter cccvii.

† *Ibid.*, letter cxxiii.

‡ "Wills from the Registers of Bury." p. 23.

down are such as a pottle pot and a quart pot, a pair of tongs, and a pair of bellows. Roger Rokewoode, of Euston, "squier," bequeaths to his son Robert, twenty-four pounds of lawful money, six kine, four horses, a brass pot, two brass pans, six pewter dishes, four saucers and three platters of pewter, a feather bed, a pair of sheets, and a pair of blankets.\* The kine, the horses, and the saucers and platters, appear of equal importance. The deficiency of household comfort is sufficiently shown by such minute dispositions of old and mean chattels, of little value now, but then estimated in proportion to their scarcity.

Running over wills of this period we find an equal scantiness of apparel. The "Wardrobe Accounts" of princes present a dazzling catalogue of new long gowns, doublets, demy gowns, jackets, tippets, slops—made of velvet, damask, cloth of gold, ermine. But when we come to peer into the wardrobes of the gentry and the burgesses, we see how carefully they treasured their articles of clothing. One testator leaves to a friend "one of my short gowns, a good one which is convenient for him, and my russet hood." † Another desires that a neighbour's wife shall have "my best lined gown and my cloak." ‡ Another bestows "a doublet and a pair of hosen." § A worthy lady bequeaths to her son, "a tawny jacket lined with yellow." ¶ How the bravery of their apparel was a great point with the higher classes, and how they were pinched to obtain their costly finery, we have abundant evidence. One of the Pastons honestly tells his brother that a real friend thus reproved his extravagance in dress and servants: "It is the guise of your countrymen to spend all the goods they have on men and livery gowns, and horse and harness, and so bear it out for a while, and at the last they are but beggars." ¶ They were as solicitous about their own dress as about the splendour of their attendants; and their solicitude for display sometimes made them ridiculous. "The gallant with the great chain," who is going to be married, is clearly a butt for the Norwich ladies. Hats were a French invention of 1449; and a belted knight writes, "Send me a hat and a bonnet by the same man; and let him bring the hat upon his head, for fear of misfashioning it."\*\* The importance attached to articles of clothing was, no doubt, the result of their comparative dearness. Coarse cloth for labourers, as we learn from the statute, was not to

\* "Wills from the Registers of Bury," p. 53

† "Bury Wills," p. 41.

‡ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

§ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¶ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¶ Paston Letters, letter lv.

\*\* *Ibid.*, letter cclxiv.

exceed 2s. per yard; fine cloth, fit for the gown of a doctor at an university, cost 3s. 7d. Multiplying these values by 15—the supposed relation of present to ancient money-value—we see that a fine gown, which would demand several yards of broad cloth, would be a costly article; and that the working man's dress would require considerable outlay. A hat cost a shilling—the felt hat which, looking at the different value of money, is now bought at a fourth of that amount. Although the government was always regulating the price of materials of apparel, it prevented the only practical regulation, by utterly prohibiting the importation of woollen cloth, caps, hats, gloves, girdles, wrought leather, shoes.\* If in the home manufacture any cheapening process was discovered, it was put down, upon the principle which the common sense of mankind has not wholly discarded, that what abridges labour, and therefore lessens the cost of production, is a public evil: "It is showed in the said parliament, how that hats, bonnets, and caps, as well single as double, were wont to be faithfully made, wrought, fulled, and thicked by men's strength, that is to say, with hands and feet, and thereby the makers of the same have honestly before this time gained their living, and kept many apprentices, servants, and good houses, till now of late that by subtle imagination, to the destruction of the labours and sustenance of many men, such hats, bonnets, and caps have been fulled and thicked in fulling-mills, and in the said mills the said hats and caps be broken and deceitfully wrought, and in no wise by the mean of any mill may be faithfully made." † The "subtle imagination" which is here denounced has filled England with wealth, of which the humblest in the land is a partaker, in the universal diffusion of those conveniences and comforts of life which "men's strength, that is to say, with hands and feet," could never have produced except for the rich few.

Of the inner household life we have some glimpses. The domestic servants of the wealthy were numerous; and those of the middle classes, as well as of the upper, appear to have been treated with a kindness and consideration that belonged to a period when no dignity was supposed to be compromised by considering dependants as humble friends. We have repeated examples of bequests to servants. In the correspondence of those servants in trust, such as bailiffs of manors, we have a frank statement of their opinions, not only as to the arrangement of property, but of higher matters concerning their master's interest. That there was eye

\* Stat. 3 Edward IV. cap. 4.

† Stat. 22 Edward IV. cap. 5.

service and faithlessness in this state of society, as in more refined times, we may readily believe. We have seen, in the course of the public history, how mighty princes were deserted upon their death-beds, and their valuables carried off. A law of this period declares that "divers household servants, as well of lords as of other persons of great degree, shortly after the death of their said lords and masters, violently and riotously had taken and spoiled the goods which were of their said lords and masters at the time of their death, and the same distributed amongst them, to the impediment of the executors of the will of their said lords and masters."\* The constant disputes about succession, and the delays in the administration of estates, may have prompted to these evil courses.

The position of females in the arrangements of family is a tolerably certain indication of the general state of society. We have no materials for speaking of the female life of the times of Henry VI. and Edward IV., besides those we derive from that invaluable source of information, the "Paston Letters." We do not refer so constantly to this remarkable correspondence, which extends over forty-five years, through any peculiar belief of its importance. Mr. Hallam has called attention to these letters as "a precious link in the chain of the moral history of England, which they alone in this period supply."† We here see the daughters of the house subjected to that strict discipline which then, and long after, marked the relations of child and parent. Other females, besides the daughters, were educated in the houses of the gentry; the claims of blood demanding protection for those without fortune. That the young women were, for the most part, well instructed, we may judge from the number of excellent letters, from married and single, which are found in this Paston collection. In the matters of love and matrimony, the daughters were greatly dependent upon the will of their parents, but in some cases they appear to have a pretty determined will of their own. Every effort was made in this Paston family to break off a contract which one daughter had made with a person of inferior degree; but the young lady eventually triumphed.‡ The interposition even of royalty to recommend a marriage was not always successful. "The queen [Margaret of Anjou] came into this town on Tuesday last past, after noon, and abode here till it was Thursday afternoon; and she sent after my cousin Elizabeth Clere, to come to her; and she

\* Stat. 33 Henry VI. cap. 1.

† "Literature of Europe," vol. i. p. 228.

‡ "Once upon a Time," by Charles Knight.

durst not disobey her commandment, and came to her. And when she came in the queen's presence, the queen made right much of her, and desired her to have an husband, the which ye shall know of hereafter. But as for that, he is never nearer than he was before."\* The old days were passed, when the knight knelt at the feet of his lady-love, and went forth to the tournament to challenge all men to produce her equal in beauty and virtue. The knight now ascertained what portion the lady's father would give, and he bargained for the uttermost crown. The mother made no hesitation in speaking boldly to a powerful person for a daughter, "to get for her one good marriage if he knew any." They were a plain-speaking race, and went straight to the real object of their hearts, without any unnecessary diplomacy. The "goodly young woman," not overburdened with accomplishments, but not ignorant; who could "use herself to work readily, as other gentlewomen do, and somewhat to help herself," was pretty sure to find an eligible partner. In the married life she had need of much practical knowledge besides sewing, and spinning, and housewifery. The lord of the household was no constant dweller in his own castle or manor-house. He was away, fighting, or hawking, or looking after his law-suits in London; and the lady had the rule of his retainers and the welcome of his friends—the management of his farms, the sharp bargainings with his tenants. When she gave her hand she obeyed as well as loved with a fidelity and serious devotion to her duties that could dispense with romance; and the father of her children was always to her "worshipful."

The statute of the 3rd year of Edward IV. is more minute in its enumeration of wrought goods forbidden to be imported than any which had preceded it; and it enables us to form some notion of the extent of those home manufactures which supplied the increasing domestic requirements of the people. We have mentioned the more important articles of apparel thus protected from foreign competition. The articles for which the lady was to rely upon native skill were laces, corses, ribands, fringes, twined silk, embroidered silk, laces of gold, points, bodkins, scissors, pins, purses, pattens. But the prohibition was pretty equal with both sexes; for the gentleman, to whom the equipments of his horse was a matter of the first concern, had no choice but of English saddles, spurs, and bridles. His knife, his dagger, and his razor, were to be English; and the renown of the Sheffield "whittle" would imply that he need

\* Paston Letters, letter li.

not seek excellence in foreign blades. In all iron ware, England relied upon her native forges for andirons, gridirons, locks, hammers, pincers, fire-tongs, dripping-pans, chafing-dishes, ladles, scummers. Hanging-candle-sticks and curtain-rings were forbidden to be imported, in common with metal basons and ewers. Playing cards and dice were amongst the prohibited articles. We thus see that our housekeepers of the fifteenth century had artificers labouring for them in various fashions. Time has spared few of the articles then produced almost solely "by man's strength," or we should discover how rudely many of the expensive wares were then fabricated, which science has now made beautiful and cheap. Many an old thrifty housewife has been in the condition of Lydgate, the chief poet of this period, who walks through London, invited by the tradesmen of Cheap and Canwick-street to buy "velvet, silk, and lawn," and she has said with him, when she saw the variety of fabrics unknown to the home of her childhood—

"I never was used to such things indeed,  
And, wanting money, I might not speed." \*

We must turn from this bewildering enumeration of what the artisans of England had been gradually learning to produce, since the primitive time when king Alfred made his horn lantern, to look rapidly at some of the broader aspects of domestic life which remain to be indicated.

We have few materials at this period to estimate the general manners of the Clergy, and especially those of the higher churchmen, as in the preceding century, when satire and solemn invective dared to raise their voices against the pride, covetousness, and luxury of bishops and mitred abbots; denouncing jovial monks and idle seculars as abandoned ministers to public immorality. The severities against those who spoke out against the corruptions of the Church had shut the mouths even of the boldest. To be pointed at as a heretic was even more fatal than to be suspected as a traitor. Lollardie was crushed. The abbey might more and more appropriate the revenues that ought to have been the reward of the parish priest. The bishop might neglect his sacred functions, to add to his revenues the fees of the great offices of state; and, like cardinal Beaufort, procure laws to be made against commercial freedom, and then receive large sums for licences to violate them. Great spiritual lords might band themselves with great

\* "London Lyckpenny."

temporal lords, to withdraw the funds of hospitals from their proper uses, and leave the old, the lazar, the lunatic, and the pregnant woman, for whose benefit those hospitals were endowed, to perish at their utmost need.\* They need not now fear that the Commons would again complain, as in 1410 and in 1414, that the clergy were masters of one-third of the revenue of the kingdom; and that if the superfluities of their revenues were properly applied, the realm would be in a better position of defence, the poor better maintained, and the clergy would attend more to their own functions. Such a compromise as that which the Church had made with Henry V., by allowing him, upon these allegations, to appropriate the revenues of a hundred and ten priories of aliens, would not again be necessary in this day of ecclesiastical powers. With all this security, the gorgeous edifice was mouldering at its base. We must wait half a century before the great crash comes. Let us here trace a few illustrations of the domestic intercourse of the clergy with the laity.

In almost every house of the nobility and higher gentry there was a chaplain. In a very large number of parishes there was a curate. The incumbent, in too many instances, was a pluralist; and thus many of the attacks of Wycliffe and his followers were levelled against those who took the wages of the shepherd and neglected the sheep. This class of chaplains and working curates was very indifferently paid. By the statute of the 36th of Edward III., no parish priest nor yearly priest should take more than five marks, or at most six, "for their wages by year." The statute of the 2nd of Henry V. avers that "they will not serve but for ten pounds, or twelve, or ten marks by year, at least." The unquestionable rise in the price of commodities made the poor priest as discontented with their legal wages as we have seen that the masons were. They were to be met by new laws, made by the influence of the wealthier clergy, and of the lay great men who were to pay for their services; and thus the statute ordains that "no yearly chaplain shall take for his whole wages by year, for his board, apparel, and other necessaries, but seven marks, and the parish priests which serve cures shall take but eight marks, unless by licence of the ordinary." The highest payment for a parish priest was nine marks—six pounds. The artificer at fourpence a day earned about as much as the parish priest, to suffice for "his board, apparel, and other necessaries." That this class of men would

\* Statute for reformation of abuses of the funds of hospitals. 2 Henry V. cap. 1.

cherish a rooted dislike of the full-fed monk, and of the mendicant friar who contrived to have a sufficient share of the goods of the world, was inevitable; and the discontent gathered strength, till the image with the head of gold and the feet of iron and clay was broken to pieces. But meanwhile they laboured diligently, as many of the brethren of the monastic orders also laboured; or they could not have kept alive, amidst many observances which we properly regard as superstitious, a real spirit of piety and charity amongst the people. Some of the Wills which we have mentioned, in connection with less important matters, afford sufficient proof that this spirit was not dead in the century which preceded the Reformation.

The presiding influence of religion is to be traced wherever the individual mind displays itself. It is not the influence of the particular chaplain or confessor—the reliance upon his holiness or the admiration of his learning—but the irresistible conviction that the Church is all-powerful to condemn or to save. The interference of the ecclesiastic with men's temporal affairs was never ceasing; and the officiousness was often hastily resented by members of the family where the priest was supreme. John Paston complains that his mother's chaplain has turned her affection from her sons: "Sir James \* and I be twain; we fell out before my mother, with 'thou proud priest,' and 'thou proud squire,' my mother taking his part, so I have almost beshut the bolt as for my mother's house." But the Church held its empire over the will of the population, high and low, through the universal belief in the efficacy of its ceremonial observances for procuring health and weal and the safety of souls. A husband is sick in London; and his anxious wife writes, "My mother behested [vowed] another image of wax of the weight of you, to our Lady of Walsingham; and she sent four nobles to the four orders of friars at Norwich to pray for you; and I have behested to go on pilgrimage to Walsingham and St. Leonards." † These were not the mere fancies of the women of that time. William Yelverton, a judge of the King's Bench, writes to thank his cousin for his zeal "for Our Lady's House of Walsingham;" adding, "for truly if I be drawn to any worship or welfare, and discharge of mine enemies' danger, I ascribe it unto Our Lady." In the most doubtful time of the wars of the Roses, in 1471, the duke of Norfolk and his duchess are on

\* The title "Sir" shows that the priest held a living.

† Paston Letters, letter v.

pilgrimage, on foot, to Our Lady of Walsingham. By a bull of the pope, the shrine of St. Jago, in Galicia, was averred to be of equal virtue for pilgrimage as the Holy Sepulchre. There was a little danger to give excitement to the short land journey in Spain, for the Moslems were still in the peninsula, and the military knights of St. Jago were organised to protect the pilgrims. From 1413 to 1456, many thousands of English sailed from Plymouth, Falmouth, Yarmouth, Bristol, Southampton, Hull, London, and many other ports, in small vessels licensed for this special service.\* Pilgrimages to Canterbury and Walsingham were ridiculed by the early reformers as mere pleasure-trips, with more merriment than sanctity; and, if we may judge from Chaucer, they were especially adapted for a people to whom the "dolce far niente"—the doing of the South—was intolerable weariness. The national characteristic then, as now, was its avidity for action. The knight, wanting home occupation, most earnestly desires that a hawk may be procured; for he says, "By my troth, I die for default of labour." † The energy of the race carried the knight into the battle-field as much for excitement as for principle; made him in peace the most daring falconer and huntsman; and sent the yeoman and peasant to their archery contests, their leaping, their vaulting, their morris-dances, and their mummings. The Church laid hold of this universal hatred of sitting down at rest, and sent them on pilgrimage.

But as the most active came naturally to look at the approaching night "when no man worketh," the Church then was at hand, with its real truths and its vain delusions, to give confidence in the last human trial. The Wills of the period afford unquestionable evidence of the constant presence of the spiritual adviser in the once busy man's "chair-days." Moneys bequeathed to the high altar of the abbey or parish-church; requiems to be said, in rich vestments appropriated for the special purpose, with a yearly reward to the priest; a newly-painted image of Our Lady to be set up, with a taper ever burning; the chimes in the steeple to be repaired; a priest to have a house to dwell in, and at every meal to repeat the name of the testator, that they that hear it may say, "God have mercy on his soul," which greatly may relieve him. It was this undoubting confidence in the prayers of the priesthood which made

\* See Turner's "History of England," vol. iii.; and Roberts's "Southern Counties," for lists of these expeditions.

† Paston Letters, letter cccxxv.

the Church so rich and powerful. Rome, and its spiritual power, were still ever present to the popular mind. One testator wishes that a Latin sentence should be written "on the fore part of the iron about my grave," with "the day and the year of our Lord of my departing from this world, and the Pardon which I purchased to be written therewith."\* Another, a lady, bequeaths "to a priest for to go to Rome, ten pounds; and I will that the said priest go to the stations and say masses as is according to a pilgrim."† But, amidst all this, the Christian sympathy for the poor and miserable displays itself in little traits of pious tenderness; in association, also, with the English hospitality. Executors are to visit the poor and bedridden, and give them each a farthing or a penny. A good dinner is to be made to neighbours and lovers; and on the day of the dinner the prisoners in the gaol are to be refreshed with meat and drink. A large endowment is made for a priest to say mass on Sundays, in the chapel of the gaol before the prisoners; and that they have seven fagots of wood every week in the winter. It would appear from this care for prisoners, that their condition was most wretched, as indeed it remained till the days of John Howard. Whatever may have been the errors of the Church of the fifteenth century, we may justly conclude that at the bottom of their teaching was a solid foundation of zeal and charity; and that in many of the concerns of life they were the kind instructors and faithful friends of the great body of the people, out of whose ranks the real working ministers for the most part proceeded.

The dominant control of the local clergy over the popular mind was a necessary result of the isolation of the village and the town. The friar and the parson were the only superior persons that mixed intimately with the burgess and the yeoman; and they only, through the same intercourse with the higher ranks, could tell of public affairs beyond the range of their own districts. The merchant, as he was called, who travelled from fair to fair, and the pilgrim, were the only bearers of news. The common carriers were more occupied with the price of oats than the affairs of state; and had more dread of thieves on the road than of changes of dynasties. Thus, there was small communication between one part of the kingdom and another; and men abode, from childhood to age, in the narrow circle of their own local influences. The slowness with which news travelled is shown by the circumstance that the result, so important to the Londoners, of the great battle of Towton was not

\* "Bury Wills," n. 19.

† *Ibid.*, p. 74.

known to them till six days after Edward's victory. "Tidings" were only to be found in letters, such as those of the Pastons. But it was dangerous to write freely; and when an opinion was given upon passing events or the characters of men, some such sentence as this was added: "After this is read and understood, I pray you burn or break it, for I am loth to write anything of any lord."\* Letters were then most carefully folded and fastened at the end by a paper band, upon which the seal was affixed. Letters were, however, not always sacred. They were entrusted sometimes to the common carriers, who might be tampered with; and neighbours were not always faithful to their trust in an age of political suspicion. "Look that ye take heed that the letter were not broken ere that it came to your hands," says Sir John Paston, when he was hesitating about his safest policy. When it was necessary to be particularly careful, a floss of silk was put under the seal; and at the parts where the paper on which the seal was impressed was folded over the letter, marks were drawn by a pen connecting the enveloping paper with the letter itself. Political secrets were, however, rarely committed to writing. Spoken words were less dangerous.

We may conclude this imperfect view of the domestic life of the fifteenth century by a brief reference to the state of knowledge amongst the laity. There were in the ranks of the nobility many encouragers of learning and literature. Humphrey of Gloucester had collected a magnificent library of six hundred volumes—a rare acquisition when we regard the value of manuscript books. The transcriber was employed in copying legal papers as well as in multiplying volumes. We have the account of one who writes twenty-eight leaves of evidence at 2*d.* a leaf; and sixty leaves of a Treatise on War at the same price. We find five marks offered for a Bible. The costly bindings of manuscripts greatly enhanced their marketable value. With this scarcity of books, we may readily conceive that reading was not a common acquirement amongst the laity. In the recommendations to a nobleman of a person "meet to be clerk of your kitchen," a "goodly young man on horse and foot, well spoken in English, meetly well in French, and very perfect in Flemish," is one who also "can write and read."† The time was at hand, when, out of the Weald of Kent, a lad should have gone to London as a draper's apprentice, who having in due course risen in estimation by his skill and industry, became the

\* Paston Letters, letter lxxxiv.

† Paston Letters, letter oclxxvi.

consul for the English merchants at Bruges. The sister of Edward IV. was married to the duke of Burgundy; and the merchant, who had a turn for letters, translated for her a French work in general esteem. Leaving his mercantile functions for a season, he was absent for two years in Germany. An invention, so simple that it appears wonderful that what affected mankind so nearly should have remained so long undiscovered—the art of printing from moveable types—was the wonder of Germany. Books were then to be produced at a tenth of the price of manuscripts. The English merchant saw the importance of the new art; he penetrated the mystery; and bestowed Printing upon England. William Caxton came, to render the ignorance of any large portion of society thenceforward impossible. He came, to be the forerunner of that great Reformation which was impracticable for Wycliffe, even with his Manuscript Bible in his hand. He came, to render Bibles and other books the common property of the great and the mean. He came, to make tyranny an impossible thing in England, when his art should have grown, like every other great institution which we have nourished, century after century, to be the chief safeguard against every form of oppression and corruption—the best upholder of just law and government. Slowly did the dissemination of knowledge by printed books change the condition of society; but henceforth we can never speak of that condition without regarding the influences of the printing press.

## CHAPTER VI.

Death-struggle of the feudal power.—The House of York.—Banishment and murder of Suffolk.—Insurrection of Cade.—He enters London.—His death.—Spirit of revolt in England.—York in arms against Somerset.—Incapacity of the king.—York Protector.—The king recovers.—York superseded.—First battle of St. Alban's.—Triumph of the Yorkists.—York's second protectorate ended.—Reconciliation of the two factions.—Commencement of the Civil War.—Battle of Blore Heath.—Parliament of Coventry.—Battle of Northampton.—The Duke of York claims the crown.—Battle of Wakefield.—Death of York.—His son, Edward, wins the battle of Mortimer's Cross.—Second battle of St. Alban's.—Edward proclaimed king.—Edward and Warwick march from London.—Battle of Towton.

"THE convulsive and bleeding agony of the feudal power" \* is the great story which we have to trace during the second half of the fifteenth century. We have seen the building up of the Constitution during seven centuries, when the men of England, from whatever stock derived, were working, like the builders of the second Temple, with their swords ever in their hands. We have seen the representative principle gradually asserting itself against despotic power, whether of the crown, the aristocracy, or the church, till it finally raised up the stronghold which assault or sap could never destroy. But "the troubled birth of constitutional monarchy," † succeeding to that feudal death-struggle, might have given us a dwarfed and puny Charter of Rights, but for the peculiarities of race and nurture of the great body of the people. We have seen this people, prepared by hundreds of years of discipline for the development of freedom under its changed aspects, when the reign of feudality was coming to its close. Whatever were the defects of the various states of society which we have endeavoured to exhibit, we have seen, in the aggregate national character, the elements of future greatness and prosperity. Whatever the disturbances of foreign or internal war, as we approach nearer the line which separates ancient and modern manners we have seen a people active, enterprising, trained to individual exertion, patriotic, class mingling with class, and no class ever losing sight of the grand national foundation of individual freedom.

\* Barante; article in "Revue Française," March, 1829. † *Ibid.*