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OLIVER CROMWELL

THE seventeenth century constitutes a treasure-house of enlightenment for Church and State; for Christian and for citizen, as such. Yet ignorance of its personalities and its occurrences is widespread. False ideas are taken for granted not only in popular outlook, but in responsible centres of educative influence.

A case in which this strongly applies is that of the dominating figure of the mid-century, Oliver Cromwell. He has been classified as, for instance, a holy saint, or a wicked criminal. At the present time there is a tendency to regard him as a great national champion against some vaguely conceived national enemy. Tainted, no doubt, by an unfortunate religiosity. But capable of making everything go swimmingly, and of leading his admirers to victory against whatever happens to irk them individually. Most, however, of these present-day admirers would be highly incensed if they ever came under the restrictions of a Cromwellian discipline and moral schoolmastering.

The national reform movement of the early sixteenth-century, beating against the inflexibility of the influences which controlled the throne, passed gradually into the hands of the wild men. Their aims and their methods were increasingly deflected from those of the original Christian reformers. The belief remained that God was on their side; and under cover of this conviction their proceedings became egoistic, unscrupulous and bloodthirsty. In principle, though not necessarily in detail, they were overtaken by the same perils which, close to our own day, beset the adherents of Christian perfectionism. In the case of the Puritans the perfection was not attributed to themselves. Far from it. But to the cause of judgment and vengeance to which they were self-dedicated. Great was Richard Baxter's horror when, on visiting his friends in the army after Naseby, he discovered the spiritual decline and political anarchy that was eating into the heart of the Puritan host. He was inclined to believe it fomented by subtle Jesuit conspiracy. He accepted the chaplaincy of Whalley's battalion of the Ironsides with the distinct aim of countering the new

evil influences, and of endeavouring to lead these professedly godly men in the paths of Christian love and light, and in the clean policy of the original reform leaders. A serious illness and a sick furlough possibly saved him from assassination by the fanatics. From his sick-bed came *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*.

Of the new movement in the Puritan Army Cromwell became the natural leader largely on account of his basic outlook, as well as his chieftainship of the originally godly Ironsides; but very specially through his outstanding commonsense in practical matters, and his tendency towards toleration in the matter of sectarian differences. And he did not blindly follow the stream: he directed it.

These tendencies brought a conquering leader to that particular party of zealots. But his capacity for leadership arose from his own remarkable personality. Let us squarely look at it.

Cromwell was, essentially, an English gentleman-farmer of overbearing determination and drive, and of exceptionally keen, practical shrewdness. Lightened with rough, country jollity; and darkened with a recurrent, fixed-idea mind-storminess, perhaps arising from glandular trouble. As such, he was all his life drawn on by, and tossed between, two irreconcilable magnets.

(1) His old Adam. Intensely self-absorbed and self-willed. Not always consciously; but innately. He had the normal country, pig-killing type of brutality, which was not recognised as brutal. Also a tendency to flare up into sinister furies, in which he was unscrupulous and uncontrolled. The dark passions that haunted him before his conversion sprang up again insidiously in his subsequent life of conflict in the guise of righteous indignation. In 1645 after Naseby and again after Prior's Hill at Bristol he wrote glowing tributes to the good work in battle of the godly saints who deserved so well of their country. And after Naseby (apparently after a service of thanksgiving) those same saints had deliberately proceeded to murder the Irishwomen among the prisoners wholesale, and to slash the faces of the Englishwomen to spoil their beauty. After the capture of Prior's Hill fort the defenders were slaughtered like cattle. Three years later, after Preston, Oliver ordered that in certain eventualities the prisoners were to be massacred. Next year he personally carried through the massacre of the captured men of Drogheda, and gave his countenance to another holocaust by his soldiers soon after.

During that year 1649 he seems to have lived under the shadow of a sinister type of insanity. This was associated, in its outburst, with his morbid self-delusion that he was Divinely authorised to murder the King. Of this crime he never openly repented: probably because he dared not let himself doubt his Divine right of King-slaughter. Bravely tackled on the subject by Richard Baxter at a later date, he burst into a characteristic, raving monologue of self-defence. Had he allowed himself, at any time, to acknowledge his guilt, it is possible that horror and self-abhorrence would have turned him into a raving maniac. As it was, the resultant brain-storm of 1649, after the murder, made him a horrorsome creature of homicidal hysteria for many months; after which the savagery dissolved into a self-satisfied exultation which remained till after Worcester. In his Protectorship there came a dimming both of his savagery and of his Christian faith, though he was ashamed to own the latter publicly. Nay, he had the grace to realise what harm this would do and, leaving stark home discipline to his subordinates, he applied himself to the attempted building-up of material Protestant, and especially British, world power.

Alternating (or actually combined) with the brutal side he had a coarse, guffawing, horseplay type of jollification, perhaps touched with farmyard uncleanness of language. Also, alas, a tendency in a tight place, to be false, dissimulating, humbugging, treacherous. Vices specially oppressive in a professing Christian with so wide a sphere of activity. During 1648 he almost wallowed in deceit and hypocrisy, beginning with sharp practice in his parliamentary negotiations, and going on to his fervid and tearful false-swearing to the Scottish Covenant leaders, which he speedily and drastically reversed in his actual conduct. It is a happy record which tells of his repentance on his death-bed from injustice and duplicity, as well as from passion, pride and forgetfulness of God. We need not question the sincerity of his contrition or doubt the forgiveness that was there ready for him, and for ourselves.

(2) Simultaneously with the downward drag of the dark forces within (physical forces in the main), a very different power exerted a mighty upward pull. It was there in his youth; dominant in his conversion, and never ceased altogether through all the years in which this giant, who could so dominate his fellow-men, lurched this way and that between the forces

which swayed him like a weak, bewildered child. (How remarkably like Newman sometimes!)

He lived under an intense, dominating sense of the existence and omnipotence of God, whose power and stern judgments especially weighed with him. He came to believe himself a vessel chosen of God to execute these His judgments. He sincerely and earnestly desired to serve God. To do good to his fellowmen. To bring happiness to the underdog. To promote godliness. Like soldiers and surgeons he was, rightly or wrongly, prepared to suppress natural feelings of kindness, in the pursuit of what he believed to be stern duty. More happily, he was a pioneer of modern tolerance. Along definite lines, it is true, with sharp intolerance outside their limits and a latitudinarian laxity within. But his good-natured attitude of live-and-let-live, when not cancelled by bucolic obtuseness or by some appalling brainstorm, was in marked contrast to that of the party which he led to power. Compare his friendship with Fox with the persecution of the Quakers by the other sects. Or his amiable attitude towards Episcopalians, with the laws he sanctioned against them. Or the same factors in respect of the Scottish Presbyterians. Or his remarkable period of friendliness with, and admiration for, Charles the First in the summer of 1647. The duplicity which brought this to an end was not Cromwell's this time, it was the King's; and it led to one of the serious physical and mental breakdowns which ushered in the various contrasted phases in Oliver's chequered career. When the dark shadows passed he could be sweet-tempered, happy and lovable. Note in this connection his devotion to his daughters, and the sparkling sunshine that could come over his nature when in their lively company.

What was the defect which kept him from the unbroken control of the heavenly magnet, and gave its opportunity to the earthly one? We get, at any rate, a symptom in his self-chosen method of seeking God's guidance. He seems to have become shy of looking for practical direction in the Bible, unless he could frame an interpretation in accordance with his personal wishes. But he set much store by "Providences", i.e. practical results. If he won, God was with him, and his methods were right. And yeoman Oliver Cromwell set himself resolutely always to win!

The desire to do God's will was intense, and when he

felt he had lost God's favour he became miserable, and, in fact, physically ill. But, subconsciously, he would not let go of his own intentions and passions. Hence the complete confusion between the will of God and the will of Oliver. We can see the disastrous results to a man who lived on an immensely influential scale. Yet who can proudly cast the first stone at him? And who cannot learn wisdom from his bold and stormy blunder-soaked adventure?

The emancipation movement, which for a time fell into his control, opened the door firmly for the succeeding generation to enter in. In the interlude the doorway was blocked, but the blocking eventually brought about its own collapse. The Cromwellian violence of reaction to Stuart and Laudian perversity provoked a counter-reaction which left even deeper marks on our national life. And when the great deliverance came in 1688 it certainly did not come from the wild men, but from a combination, in common peril, of the adherents of the two old traditions of 1640—slightly modified traditions, but fundamentally the same. It came from the successors of the 1640 Cavaliers and Puritans; the court party and the anti-court party, both, as before, loyalist Churchmen, united in 1688 by a refusal to betray their country, body or soul, to an alien tyranny.

This long work of emancipation Cromwell had greatly helped and also greatly hindered. Speaking humanly and materially, it seems doubtful if the ultimate deliverance could have expectably come in any other way than by a series of reactions. It was, actually, the way in which God led our nation to Protestant Christian toleration and constitutional Throne-power.

In the early stages of an emancipation movement propelled from within, when the fettered and mind-clouded prisoners are scheming and struggling to burst their bonds, tragic follies are apt to have their day. And it involves no necessary condonation of sinister lapses into crime if we realise and own our debt, under God's mercy, to the giants whose invincibility so largely contributed to our present freedom and opportunity. Oliver Cromwell is by no means the only champion to whom these words apply.