

## Monks and People at the Opening of the Sixteenth Century.

By ALBERT MITCHELL.

AT Eynesham in the "Countie of Oxenford" was a monastery of an Abbot and Convent following the Rule of St. Benedict. In 1502 the Abbot was one Miles Sawley, who was also Bishop of Llandaff, but resided most of his time at Eynesham. Near by, along the shores of the Thames, one John Walshe held a farm under Sir Robert Harecourt (one of the leading men of the county), which included a little island in the midst of the river.

Among the monks in the monastery was one Dan Roger Wallingford, who, said the Abbot, had the rule of the waters and nets of the monastery. The title "Dan" is a corruption of the Latin *Dominus*, and was a general title of social status; for a Benedictine monk ranked as a gentleman: there was no hardship of poverty involved in his official renunciation of private rights of property. On his entry into religion, as his profession of the Rule of St. Benedict was termed, he became a new man<sup>1</sup> ("Conversion of Life" was the first of the three-fold vow), and dropping for ever his patronymic, he assumed the name of his birthplace as a new surname. It should be remembered that there was no "Order of St. Benedict" until a very late date. The term "Order" is rightly applied (in medieval times) only to the various bodies of "reformed" monks, or other "religious," that sprung up after the first decay of monastic enthusiasm. Every Benedictine House was, like a Congregational church to-day, a self-complete community under its own Abbot.

John Walshe was, the Abbot tells us, "otherwise called Sawyer," and, as the Abbot, seeking to implicate Sir Robert Harecourt as deeply as possible in the quarrel that is recorded

<sup>1</sup> The Will of a person who had "entered religion" could be proved as if he were dead; and his executor could sue for debts due to him.

in the musty records of the Star Chamber, calls him Sir Robert's "servant," it is likely that he was, or had been, a woodman on Sir Robert's estate. Perhaps he held his farm by rendering such service in part payment of his rent, a not uncommon occurrence in days when coin was very scarce.

In this narration I propose to give the preference where possible to honest John's version of the events. To me it reads true, in the homely touches that show through the legal phraseology; while the Abbot's story is too complete in its artistic finish to carry conviction.

So I begin the story on the 16th day of February in the year of grace 1502, when John Walshe saw Dan Roger and his servant Christopher come along in a boat and land upon his little island. That was a trespass; but there was more behind. Sir Robert testifies that the said John had complained to him that Dan Roger and Christopher would oftentimes come with their boat to the island and draw up his "lepys" (*i.e.*, his baskets, or perhaps his dippers or balers) and storepots, and steal his fish "early and late"; and worthy John, to comply with legal forms, deposed that he by that means lost fish "to the value of forty shillings and above"; and, moreover, poor man! he was "sore grieved." But he had no evidence, though he had "ofttimes watched to espy the takers of the said Fish and could not find them." To-day fortune was on John's side; but he had no other witness at hand, and, as he says, "no Record with him by cause they should after that deny it." So he crept up and carried away their boat, "seditiously," says the wrathful Abbot, and "intending to have destroyed them, and so left them there like to have perished"; for, adds the Abbot with artistic pathos, "it was cold weather and frosty." But John says he was "thinking to them no harm but to have their deed openly known."

When Dan Roger and his man saw what had happened they "cried for help," for the water was round them by the space of half a mile; and according to the Abbot, a good Samaritan, in the person of Ralph Mury, came with a boat and

saved their lives, "or else that night they had been destroyed for cold and with the water." That sounds piteous; but I prefer John Walshe's version: "There is a ferry boat, and men keeping the same near the said Isle, which within an hour after conveyed them to the said Abbey." The next thing that happened in the story seems to suggest that John had a clear conscience, and expected Dan Roger and his man to hold their tongues. But they did not; they carried their tale of woe to the Abbot and brethren, and explained their presence on John Walshe's land by alleging that the previous September John had borrowed of Dan Roger a draught-net to fish with on terms of going shares, and had left the "poising stones" on the island; and that their journey thither had been to search for these stones. It does not sound very likely, as no previous dispute as to the net or the share of fish is alleged, and five months had elapsed.

But, seemingly all unsuspecting of the rising feud, John Walshe came up to town on March 15 and landed at the common landing-place. This happened to be just at the end of the convent orchard, and in an unlucky moment John committed the terrible offence of tying his boat to one of the orchard trees. Away went John up to Eynesham town with "such stuff as he had to carry home." The monks or their servants promptly seized the opportunity and the boat, and, according to the Abbot, took a lock and locked it to a tree; but John says they "drowned" it. John says it was "out of malice" for his own deed; and that seems not unlikely. The Abbot says it was for the hurt, harm, and great damage to the monastery snares and nets, which he impliedly accuses John of stealing. Perhaps this was a reference to Dan Roger's allegation as to the September occurrence! John missed his boat, and "having information" as to its whereabouts, came "to seek again the same boat, and there found his said boat drowned." The Abbot grows indignant as he records that John came with a bill (half axe and half spear) and a hanger (short sword or chopper), simple enough woodland weapons to release a

“locked” boat. John got over the high wall, and found two of the monks on the watch. He says they assaulted, sore beat, and wounded him, and also imprisoned him, so that he was not able by long space after to earn his own living. The Abbot’s version is a little different. He says John knocked one of the monks down and the other ran away (“avoided”); and he complains of John’s bad language. At any rate, John did not get his boat, and that rather confirms *his* story.

Eight days after, on Wednesday in Holy Week,<sup>1</sup> John came to the monastery with three friends, Thomas Catter, John Vaughan, and Robert Smyth, and also Martin Whithill, Sir Robert’s household servant, and three other servants of Sir Robert (the Abbot craftily calls them “retainers” to bring the knight into suspicion with the King, who had made “retaining” illegal, and the knight’s plea in denial shows consequent great uneasiness). Martin Whithill was the spokesman, and interceded with the Abbot to release the arrested boat; and, according to John, the Abbot told them to go and look for it. The Abbot himself drily says he “satisfied them with good and cold words.” But when they found the boat, and would have loosed it, the Prior came upon them with “thirteen monks and five secular persons,” with bows, arrows, bills, swords, and other

<sup>1</sup> “Tenebrae Wednesday,” says the Abbot, thereby giving a very interesting insight into the customs of the Convent (“Convent” denotes the human element, not the structure). “Tenebrae” was the name given to the peculiar ceremony appointed at Rome for the “Nocturns” of Good Friday. “Nocturns” was the first service of the daily round, held in the small hours of the morning (commencing at midnight). It had its origin in the early Christian vigil during the night between Saturday and Sunday, founded in form on the worship of the Synagogue, and it has its modern English counterpart in Morning Prayer, which is not as the ignorant allege a “clerical office,” but the direct descendant of the most ancient lay liturgical form. “Tenebrae” denotes the practice of extinguishing all the lights one by one as the service proceeded until, by the end of *Benedictus*, only one was left for the reader, which was afterwards hidden until the next day, the service on Holy Saturday (Easter Eve) being wholly conducted in the dark, except this one light for the reader. But the Frankish Church introduced the custom of performing this ceremony also not only on Holy Saturday but on Maundy Thursday, and this variation gradually ousted the old Roman custom. But in a house like Eynesham, where the comfortable exercise of religion had displaced earlier monastic austerity, evidently “Nocturns” were disposed of before the Convent retired to rest on Wednesday night, and so the ceremony had come to be considered as belonging to the Wednesday.

weapons, and put them to flight. But John has the satisfaction of remembering that one of the pursuing monks "fell in a great mire and there stuck fast till he was holpen out," for the ditch was fifteen feet wide.

The quarrel rankled till Low Sunday, when it blazed up again. Three of the countrymen came into the Church of the Abbey "to hear evensong,<sup>1</sup> because it was Sunday," and two of the monks, one of them the original offender, Dan Roger Wallingford, ordered them out with very uncanonical language. There were many other people about, whether naturally or of design does not appear, and a number of servants of the monastery. Rough words were followed by rough blows. John Hadley, clerk of the church, "an innocent body" the Abbot calls him, had been to buy oil for the church (remember it was Sunday, so this is another sidelight on manners), and he was smitten over the head with a dagger, not too seriously to prevent him from disturbing the Prior and convent at supper with his plaint. A gentlewoman was shot through the arm with a crossbow arrow or bolt by a monk or monastery servant, and several countrymen and townsmen were badly hurt. The constable of the town came with the tithing men (a tithing was the tenth part of a "hundred," and the tithing man was the guardian of its order) and exhorted all men to keep the peace "in God's name and the King's," and the rest of the townsfolk joined zealously in the fray to "assist the said constable in keeping of the King's peace"—a delightfully naïve description—for we can imagine the grim satisfaction with which John Walshe took his part, as he stoutly says he did, "to aid and assist the said constable." The Prior and sub-Prior, "in jeopardy of their lives," took cover (another little touch that shows they were out in the skirmish), and a big disturbance took place at the monastery gates, those outside hewing "at their legges under the gate" with their halberts or long bills,

<sup>1</sup> It is the laymen who use this peculiarly beautiful old English name for the amalgamation of the two Canonical offices of Vespers and Compline, said together according to the later medieval custom.

and pushing up straw and furze in order to set fire to the gates, while those within piled up timber inside to resist the onslaught. News of the affray spread to the adjoining village of Staunton, whence the villagers appear to have come over at night to join the besiegers. But on the morrow two Justices of the Peace were summoned from Oxford, Maister William Harecourt (kinsman of Sir Robert and several times Sheriff) and Mr. Eggecombe (Alderman, and afterwards Mayor), and they assuaged the tumult.

Sir Robert Harecourt, the local magnate, came home a month later "out of Staffordshire" (where he had been during these troubles). Such of the quarrellers as were his tenants he "commanded forthwith to ward in the stocks"; and discharged poor John Walshe and another of their tenancies. But he also indicted a goodly company of monks at Chipping Norton Sessions on the charge of felony; and when local influence procured their acquittal, renewed the indictment at Henley-on-Thames, which was twenty-six miles from the Monastery, where the indictments were returned into the King's Bench, probably to secure an unprejudiced trial in London. For all this, and for the hearing of many other complaints that he had to lay against Sir Robert himself on other matters, the Abbot petitioned the King for writs of subpœna from the all-powerful Court of Star Chamber at Westminster. Sir Robert said in his reply that the Abbot "of his high and cruel mind picketh many quarrels to his poor neighbours," and prayed that the charges of the Abbot might be dismissed with costs.

All this may be read in the records of the Star Chamber (Leadam's "Select Cases, Selden Society," vol. xvi., and Pollard's "Henry VII.," vol. ii.); but we lack information as to the final result of the litigation, although it is on record that the officers of the court found trouble in serving the writs. Does it not show considerable light not only on the condition of official religion in England in the early days of the sixteenth century and the relations of its exponents with the people, but also on the readiness of the Commons to give cordial assistance to Henry VIII. in the dissolution of the monasteries?