PRODUCTION *and* POLITICS

VIII.—The Beginnings of Our Bourgeoisie

In this article Walton Newbold traces the forces at work undermining the social economy of feudal England—the forces which were to bring into being that new social order against which we, in our turn, are working to-day.

IN my last article (May PLEBS) entitled "The Sheep in Statecraft," which dealt with the rearing of sheep with a view to the sale of wool for profit, we commenced to bridge the gulf between the mediæval and the modern world. The rearing of animals on the manorial lands, not merely to supply the needs of one manor or lordship, but to augment the surplus of skins and wool available for trade with the agents of foreign buyers or with merchants from the boroughs, occasioned as time went on an entire change of outlook both of tenant and of landlord.

It became possible to increase the rent roll of a domain without adding to it by the seizure of other tracts of cultivated land. The desired increase could be obtained at the expense of the rights of common enjoyed by the customarily established but otherwise socially and politically impotent villeins and cottars. It could be obtained, moreover, without adding to—in fact, whilst diminishing—the number of labourers employed. Wool was a commodity that could be exchanged for wares brought in from the great marts of Italy and Flanders, making available to the manor-lords the rich stuffs and innumerable luxuries of the South.

The trade in wool hastened the transformation of labour-dues and rents-in-kind into money-rents and made more speedy the transformation of the tenant in villeinage into a tenant farmer holding by lease or copy-hold. It also resulted in many manor-lords availing themselves of the Statute of Merton, enacted by the "parliamentum" or "great council" of the magnates attending on the King at Merton Priory in 1235, which permitted them to appropriate portions of the "waste" over which their tenants, free and unfree, had common rights, so long as they left "a sufficient quantity" of common for the needs of the tenantry. The safeguard was left vague enough and for two centuries landlords used and abused these powers, powers obtained in violation of immemorial and popular custom by what is, practically, the earliest "Statute" of which we have record. Here, the manor-lord used the King's prerogative in the "great council of the realm" to set aside custom to the advantage of his class. More than a century later, by the Statute of Labourers, the manor-lord used the King's prerogative "in parliament" to bolster up custom, also to the advantage of his class.

He who has eyes to read let him read the lessons of history.

During the 14th and 15th centuries the old manorial system of tenure —labour-rents and the like—passed almost completely away as a result of the growth of commodity production of wool and the continuous application of bourgeois methods and bourgeois money to the management of manorial estates.

The new revenues made available to the Crown from the wool-tax enabled the Edwards to pursue their policy of aggression against Scotland and France—a case of the class notions of an earlier economic epoch being

forwarded by the material means of a new class and a new economy. These wars were financed by taxes and by loans to be repaid out of the farming of taxes. By the reign of Edward III., native merchants were beginning to compete with the Italians and the Hanse for the privilege of exporting wool and collecting the taxes thereon.

The King, whose one concern with the wool-trade was to extract a revenue from it, whether by tax, borrowing or confiscation, could not but end in forfeiting his arbitrary powers in fact, though not in theory, to syndicates of English merchants, to privileged collectors and to an eventual combination of landlords and merchants, joined together in defending their otherwise divergent interests against the common insecurity, arbitrary seizures, debased currency and favour shown to foreigners.

There had been coming more and more into view, from the time of Henry III., the Society of the Merchants of the Staple, "the first and ancientest commercial society in England, so named from their exporting the staple wares of the kingdom." Membership in this Society was open to any member of any merchant guild and, presumably, to freemen of the guilds of London. This Society gained in importance throughout the 14th century, exporting chiefly wool, skins and leather. It was the first fellowship, association or company of native merchants to be licensed for overseas trade and it received its sanctions solely with a view to facilitating the collection at fixed places of a regular and ascertained revenue from export dues. It was recognised by Parliament in 1354.

We must now give attention to the merchant, trade and craft guilds, from whose ranks were recruited the members of the Society of Merchants of the Staple and other and later fellowships and companies of traders.

In the feudal manor, the lord required implicit obedience from all who dwelt upon the land whereof he was the superior. His rights were in continuous process of extension by means of new usurpations. His claims were reinforced by the sanction of the Church which, within the manor prior to the 11th century, was indistinguishable from the secular lordship. To these two authorities the loyal submission of every tenant was demanded. Any combination to resist or bargain with them was denounced as godless conspiracy and mortal sin. Yet the tenantry, both free and unfree, persisted in combining, and found in guild organisation a means of renewing by the fiction of an assumed "brotherhood" the tie of fellowship which the earlier system of kinship had formerly afforded.

The guilds survived the attempt of lordship, temporal and spiritual, to suppress them. They, generally, made the pretence of being fraternities devoted specially to the service of some patron saint and met to tell their beads and discuss their grievances at some Station of the Cross, at some statue and, later, in some chapel endowed by and reserved to their use.

At first, they existed as illegal and sinful bodies. Later, they secured the protection of the Church by the fiction that they were societies of pious men. Later still, they attained to recognition by feudal law, being chartered as corporate personalities holding land and rendering suit and service, i.e., paying for their privileges in hard cash.

Until the 16th century there was only one type of association of traders having any real importance in any but a very few of the greater towns of England, viz., the merchant guild. This was, generally speaking, an association of the free tenants having the sole right of trading within the

town and, in the case of towns on royal demense, considerable rights of trading throughout the realm. It was the merchant guild which, in most cases, purchased bit by bit the freedom of the town, making itself the ruling-body and " supplanting a more ancient constitution which was simply that of a privileged township or privileged manor."

In London, where economic development resulted in a greater differentiation of trades and crafts, and where the feudal magnates had, until the 13th century, the government of the city in their own hands, there was no merchant guild. There communities of alien merchants held great economic power. The trades which first became influential in London, economically and politically, were those engaged in victualling the Court, the religious communities, the feudal magnates and the general populace. The fishmongers and the vintners were amongst the most potent. Then there were the mercers, who sold by retail articles of attire, and the goldsmiths who had much to do with King and nobles as moneylenders and providers of bullion. It was landed magnates of London engaged in the import trade, the greater freemen of the victualling guilds and the more prosperous members of merchant guilds in sheep-grazing districts who collected wool for export to and sale in Flanders and who formed the Society of Merchants of the Staple. They exported chiefly raw materials and became somewhat exclusive.

Meanwhile the manufacture of English wool into undyed cloth was proceeding apace in London and many lesser towns, with the result that the richer merchants of the Mercers' Company, who sold haberdashery and imported silks as well as clothing materials of native origin, banded themselves together into the Fellowship of the Merchant Adventurers of England or the Brotherhood of St. Thomas of Canterbury, and securing a charter in 1406 set themselves to export cloth to the ports across the North Sea, more particularly to Flanders and Holland. Theirs was an association exporting a manufactured article and open to all English merchants on payment of a moderate entrance fee.

The members of these two Societies, the Staplers and the Adventurers, selling abroad wool in the raw and partially manufactured, exchanging a product of the manor as a commodity for money or other imported articles, often landholders turned merchants, town dwellers for the most part, were throughout three centuries changing the whole economy of England and effectively undermining the established political system of feudal society.

We do not see them at all plainly in the pages of orthodox history. The whole foreground is filled with the chivalry of 14th and 15th century England, in complete armour, their coatings blazoned with the crazy pattern quarterings of a too perfected heraldry, riding recklessly from field of war to tilting ground, from foreign foray to civil brawl, wasting in senseless faction and with prodigal hands the resources which a senile political system could still extort from a younger and more progressive economy of production.

Mediæval England vanishes from the scene at Bosworth, but long before that time the sheep bleating beneath the shears had signalled the passing of manorial society.

J. T. WALTON NEWBOLD

(To be continued.)