

Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil or The Two Nations*

I would inscribe these volumes to one whose noble spirit and gentle nature ever prompt her to sympathise with the suffering; to one whose sweet voice has often encouraged, and whose taste and judgment have ever guided, their pages; the most severe of critics, but—a perfect Wife!

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The general reader whose attention has not been specially drawn to the subject which these volumes aim to illustrate, the Condition of the People, might suspect that the Writer had been tempted to some exaggeration in the scenes which he has drawn and the impressions which he has wished to convey. He thinks it therefore due to himself to state that he believes there is not a trait in this work for which he has not the authority of his own observation, or the authentic evidence which has been received by Royal Commissions and Parliamentary Committees. But while he hopes he has alleged nothing which is not true, he has found the absolute necessity of suppressing much that is genuine. For so little do we know of the state of our own country that the air of improbability that the whole truth would inevitably throw over these pages, might deter many from their perusal.

Grosvenor-Gate, May Day, 1845.

[...]

Book 2 Chapter 5

"You lean against an ancient trunk," said Egremont, carelessly advancing to the stranger, who looked up at him without any expression of surprise, and then replied. "They say 'tis the trunk beneath whose branches the monks encamped when they came to this valley to raise their building. It was their house, till with the wood and stone around them, their labour and their fine art, they piled up their abbey. And then they were driven out of it, and it came to this. Poor men! poor men!"

"They would hardly have forfeited their resting-place had they deserved to retain it," said Egremont.

"They were rich. I thought it was poverty that was a crime," replied the stranger in a tone of simplicity.

"But they had committed other crimes."

"It may be so; we are very frail. But their history has been written by their enemies; they were condemned without a hearing; the people rose oftentimes in their behalf; and their property was divided with those on whose reports it was forfeited."

"At any rate, it was a forfeiture which gave life to the community," said Egremont; "the lands are held by active men and not by drones."

"A drone is one who does not labour," said the stranger; "whether he wear a cowl or a coronet, 'tis the same to me. Somebody I suppose must own the land; though I have heard say that this individual tenure is not a necessity; but however this may be, I am not one who would object to the lord, provided he were a gentle one. All agree the Monastics were easy landlords; their rents were low; they granted leases in those days. Their tenants too might renew their term before their tenure ran out: so they were men of spirit and property. There were yeomen then, sir: the country was not divided into two classes, masters and slaves; there was some resting-place between luxury and misery. Comfort was an English habit then, not merely an English word."

"And do you really think they were easier landlords than our present ones?" said Egremont, inquiringly.

"Human nature would tell us that, even if history did not confess it. The Monastics could possess no private property; they could save no money; they could bequeath nothing. They lived, received, and expended in common. The monastery too was a proprietor that never died and never wasted. The farmer had a deathless landlord then; not a harsh guardian, or a grinding mortgagee, or a dilatory master in chancery, all was certain; the manor had not to dread a change of lords, or the oaks to tremble at the axe of the squandering heir. How proud we are still in England of an old family, though, God knows, 'tis rare to see one now. Yet the people like to say, We held under him, and his father and his grandfather before him: they know that such a tenure is a benefit. The abbot was ever the same. The monks were in short in every district a point of refuge for all who needed succour, counsel, and protection; a body of individuals having no cares of their own, with wisdom to guide the inexperienced, with wealth to relieve the suffering, and often with power to protect the oppressed."

"You plead their cause with feeling," said Egremont, not unmoved.

"It is my own; they were the sons of the People, like myself."

"I had thought rather these monasteries were the resort of the younger branches of the aristocracy?" said Egremont.

"Instead of the pension list;" replied his companion, smiling, but not with bitterness. "Well, if we must have an aristocracy, I would sooner that its younger branches should be monks and nuns, than colonels without regiments, or housekeepers of royal palaces that exist only in name. Besides see what advantage to a minister if the unendowed aristocracy were thus provided for now. He need not, like a minister in these days, entrust the conduct of public affairs to individuals notoriously incompetent, appoint to the command of expeditions generals who never saw a field, make governors of colonies out of men who never could govern themselves, or find an ambassador in a broken dandy or a blasted favourite. It is true that many of the monks and nuns were persons of noble birth. Why should they not have been? The aristocracy had their share; no more. They, like all other classes, were benefitted by the monasteries: but the list of the mitred abbots when they were suppressed, shows that the great majority of the heads of houses were of the people."

"Well, whatever difference of opinion may exist on these points," said Egremont, "there is one on which there can be no controversy: the monks were great architects."

"Ah! there it is," said the stranger, in a tone of plaintiveness; "if the world but only knew what they had lost! I am sure that not the faintest idea is generally prevalent of the appearance of England before and since the dissolution. Why, sir, in England and Wales alone, there were of these institutions of different sizes; I mean monasteries, and chantries and chapels, and great hospitals; considerably upwards of three thousand; all of them fair buildings, many of them of exquisite beauty. There were on an average in every shire at least twenty structures such as this was; in this great county double that number: establishments that were as vast and as

magnificent and as beautiful as your Belvoirs and your Chatsworths, your Wentworths and your Stowes. Try to imagine the effect of thirty or forty Chatsworths in this county the proprietors of which were never absent. You complain enough now of absentees. The monks were never non-resident. They expended their revenue among those whose labour had produced it. These holy men too built and planted as they did everything else for posterity: their churches were cathedrals; their schools colleges; their halls and libraries the muniment rooms of kingdoms; their woods and waters, their farms and gardens, were laid out and disposed on a scale and in a spirit that are now extinct: they made the country beautiful, and the people proud of their country."

"Yet if the monks were such public benefactors, why did not the people rise in their favour?"

"They did, but too late. They struggled for a century, but they struggled against property and they were beat. As long as the monks existed, the people, when aggrieved, had property on their side. And now 'tis all over," said the stranger; "and travellers come and stare at these ruins, and think themselves very wise to moralize over time. They are the children of violence, not of time. It is war that created these ruins, civil war, of all our civil wars the most inhuman, for it was waged with the unresisting. The monasteries were taken by storm, they were sacked, gutted, battered with warlike instruments, blown up with gunpowder; you may see the marks of the blast against the new tower here. Never was such a plunder. The whole face of the country for a century was that of a land recently invaded by a ruthless enemy; it was worse than the Norman conquest; nor has England ever lost this character of ravage. I don't know whether the union workhouses will remove it. They are building something for the people at last. After an experiment of three centuries, your gaols being full, and your treadmills losing something of their virtue, you have given us a substitute for the monasteries."

"You lament the old faith," said Egremont, in a tone of respect.

"I am not viewing the question as one of faith," said the stranger. "It is not as a matter of religion, but as a matter of right, that I am considering it: as a matter, I should say, of private right and public happiness. You might have changed if you thought fit the religion of the abbots as you changed the religion of the bishops: but you had no right to deprive men of their property, and property moreover which under their administration so mainly contributed to the welfare of the community."

"As for community," said a voice which proceeded neither from Egremont nor the stranger, "with the monasteries expired the only type that we ever had in England of such an intercourse. There is no community in England; there is aggregation, but aggregation under circumstances which make it rather a dissociating, than an uniting, principle."

It was a still voice that uttered these words, yet one of a peculiar character; one of those voices that instantly arrest attention: gentle and yet solemn, earnest yet unimpassioned. With a step as whispering as his tone, the man who had been kneeling by the tomb, had unobserved joined his associate and Egremont. He hardly reached the middle height; his form slender, but well proportioned; his pale countenance, slightly marked with the small pox, was redeemed from absolute ugliness by a highly-intellectual brow, and large dark eyes that indicated deep sensibility and great quickness of apprehension. Though young, he was already a little bald; he was dressed entirely in black; the fairness of his linen, the neatness of his beard, his gloves much worn, yet carefully mended, intimated that his very faded garments were the result of necessity rather than of negligence.

"You also lament the dissolution of these bodies," said Egremont.

"There is so much to lament in the world in which we live," said the younger of the strangers, "that I can spare no pang for the past."

"Yet you approve of the principle of their society; you prefer it, you say, to our existing life."

"Yes; I prefer association to gregariousness."

"That is a distinction," said Egremont, musingly.

"It is a community of purpose that constitutes society," continued the younger stranger; "without that, men may be drawn into contiguity, but they still continue virtually isolated."

"And is that their condition in cities?"

"It is their condition everywhere; but in cities that condition is aggravated. A density of population implies a severer struggle for existence, and a consequent repulsion of elements brought into too close contact. In great cities men are brought together by the desire of gain. They are not in a state of co-operation, but of isolation, as to the making of fortunes; and for all the rest they are careless of neighbours. Christianity teaches us to love our neighbour as ourself; modern society acknowledges no neighbour."

"Well, we live in strange times," said Egremont, struck by the observation of his companion, and relieving a perplexed spirit by an ordinary exclamation, which often denotes that the mind is more stirring than it cares to acknowledge, or at the moment is capable to express.

"When the infant begins to walk, it also thinks that it lives in strange times," said his companion.

"Your inference?" asked Egremont.

"That society, still in its infancy, is beginning to feel its way."

"This is a new reign," said Egremont, "perhaps it is a new era."

"I think so," said the younger stranger.

"I hope so," said the elder one.

"Well, society may be in its infancy," said Egremont slightly smiling; "but, say what you like, our Queen reigns over the greatest nation that ever existed."

"Which nation?" asked the younger stranger, "for she reigns over two."

The stranger paused; Egremont was silent, but looked inquiringly.

"Yes," resumed the younger stranger after a moment's interval. "Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws."

"You speak of—" said Egremont, hesitatingly.

"THE RICH AND THE POOR."

At this moment a sudden flush of rosy light, suffusing the grey ruins, indicated that the sun had just fallen; and through a vacant arch that overlooked them, alone in the resplendent sky, glittered the twilight star. The hour, the scene, the solemn stillness and the softening beauty, repressed controversy, induced even silence. The last words of the stranger lingered in the ear of Egremont; his musing spirit was teeming with many thoughts, many emotions; when from the Lady Chapel there rose the evening hymn to the Virgin. A single voice; but tones of almost supernatural sweetness; tender and solemn, yet flexible and thrilling.

Egremont started from his reverie. He would have spoken, but he perceived that the elder of the strangers had risen from his resting-place, and with downcast eyes and crossed arms, was on his knees. The other remained standing in his former posture.

The divine melody ceased; the elder stranger rose; the words were on the lips of Egremont, that would have asked some explanation of this sweet and holy mystery, when in the vacant and star-lit arch on which his glance was fixed, he beheld a female form. She was apparently in the habit of a Religious, yet scarcely could be a nun, for her veil, if indeed it were a veil, had

fallen on her shoulders, and revealed her thick tresses of long fair hair. The blush of deep emotion lingered on a countenance, which though extremely young, was impressed with a character of almost divine majesty; while her dark eyes and long dark lashes, contrasting with the brightness of her complexion and the luxuriance of her radiant locks, combined to produce a beauty as rare as it is choice; and so strange, that Egremont might for a moment have been pardoned for believing her a seraph, that had lighted on this sphere, or the fair phantom of some saint haunting the sacred ruins of her desecrated fane.