

## THE ROUGH SIDE OF THE MIDDLE AGES

5- The sketch just concluded of the  
 10- composition of society during the Middle Ages  
 15- by no means accords with the idea of that  
 20- epoch which still holds its place in the mind of  
 25- the general public. In spite of the researches  
 30- and labours of enlightened historians in recent  
 35- times, such as Hallam in the early part of the  
 40- century, and, for late years, of men like Green,  
 45- Freeman, and Stubbs, the representation of the  
 50- Middle Ages put forward by bourgeois  
 55- historians, whose aim was the praising of the  
 60- escape of modern society from a period of mere  
 65- rapine and confusion, into peace, order, and  
 prosperity, is generally accepted. //

15- Doubtless there was a rough side to the  
 20- Middle Ages as to every other epoch, but there  
 25- was also genuine life and progress in them.  
 30- This, as we have seen, expressed itself on one  
 35- side in the hierarchical order of feudal society,  
 40- which was so far from being lawless that, on  
 45- the contrary, law received somewhat undue  
 50- observance therein. And on the other side that  
 55- there were certain compensations to the  
 60- shortcomings of the epoch, which we shall have  
 65- to consider before long.

30- At present, however, let us look at the  
 35- rough side of the mediæval cloth, with the  
 40- preliminary remark, that those who have drawn  
 45- so violent a contrast between mediæval  
 50- disadvantages and the gains of modern life,  
 55- have been by nature and circumstances  
 60- incapable of seeing the compensations above-  
 65- said.

35- The shortcomings of the life of the Middle  
 40- Ages resolve themselves in the main, firstly, to  
 45- the rudeness of life and absence of material  
 50- comforts: secondly, to the element of  
 55- oppression and violence in which men lived;  
 60- and thirdly, to the ignorance and superstition  
 65- which veiled so much of our truth from their  
 minds. //

45- As to the rudeness of life it must be  
 50- remembered that men do not suffer from the  
 55- lack of comforts which they have never had  
 60- before their eyes, and of which they cannot  
 65- even conceive. Indeed, in our own day, though  
 we can conceive that flying would be a  
 50- pleasanter method of progression than an  
 55- express train, nevertheless we are not made  
 60- unhappy by the fact of our not being able to fly.  
 65- The sensitiveness of men adapts itself easily to  
 their surrounding conditions, and such  
 55- inconveniences as may exist in these are not  
 60- felt by those who consider them unavoidable. It  
 65- is true that this argument can only be put  
 forward when the shortcomings are not of a  
 60- nature to degrade those who have to bear them;  
 65- but it must be admitted that there is no  
 degradation in mere external roughness of life.  
 60- For the rest, though it would be a shock for the  
 65- modern man to be transplanted, without  
 preparation, into mediæval conditions, the  
 mediæval man in his turn would probably be as  
 ill at ease amid the "comforts" of modern  
 London.

70- Another consideration is far more //  
 75- serious than this, and far more calculated to  
 80- shake our complacency in modern civilisation,  
 85- to wit that whatever advantages we have gained  
 90- over the Middle Ages are not shared by the  
 95- greater part of our population. The whole of our  
 100- unskilled labouring classes are in a far worse  
 105- position as to food, housing, and clothing than  
 110- any but the extreme fringe of the corresponding  
 115- class in the Middle Ages.

80- Let us look next at the ignorance and  
 85- superstition of the Middle Ages. In the main  
 90- this ignorance meant a *naïveté* in their  
 95- conceptions of the universe, which was partly a  
 100- survival of the animism of the earlier world. The  
 105- ignorance was not a matter of brutal choice; on  
 110- the contrary, there was a keen and  
 115- disinterested search after truth and knowledge:  
 120- and the very fact of the region of discovery  
 125- being so unknown added the charm of wonder  
 130- and scientific imagination to the research. Nor  
 should it be forgotten that what to us has  
 become superstition was to them science, and  
 that in all probability our science will be the  
 superstition of future times. It is being acknow-  
 // ledged every day that modern accepted  
 scientific explanations of the "nature of things"  
 are becoming more and more inadequate to the  
 satisfaction of true knowledge. The Ptolemaic  
 theory of astronomy was good enough for the  
 data of its day; and though it has been  
 superseded by the Copernician system, that in  
 its turn is limited as an explanation by the  
 present condition of our knowledge of the  
 universe. Though the world will never go back  
 to Ptolemy's explanation, it will go forward to  
 something more complete than any yet put  
 forth.

105- There remains the charge of violence and  
 110- misery to be dealt with. As to the misery, the  
 115- result partly of that violence and partly of the  
 120- deficient grasp of the resources of nature, its  
 125- manifestations were so much more dramatic  
 130- than the misery of our time produces, that at  
 this distance they have the effect of  
 overshadowing the everyday life of the period,  
 which in fact was not constantly burdened by  
 them. What misery exists in our own days is  
 not spasmodic and accidental, but chronic and  
 essential to the system under which we live.  
 The // well-to-do bourgeois of the nineteenth  
 century may indeed make light of this misery,  
 while he shudders at the horrors of torture, and  
 sack, and massacre of the Middle Ages,  
 because he does not feel the modern misery in  
 his own person: but the proletarian of our  
 commercial age, though he be hardened to bear  
 his lot, is not only degraded by the constant  
 pressure of sordid troubles, but cannot fail to  
 note the contrast which every hour thrusts  
 before his eyes between that lot and the easy  
 life of his masters — the possessing classes. In  
 mediæval times the violence and suffering did  
 not spare one class and fall wholly upon  
 another, the most numerous in the community.

<p>135 Even the king's person was found by many examples to be by no means sacred: "Strike the lords and spare the commons" was the cry that went up in the chase of the bloody battles of the Roses. The unsuccessful politician did not retire to the ease and pleasure of a country house, flavoured with a little literary labour and apologetics for his past mistakes, but paid with his head, or the torment of his body, // for his miscalculations as to possible majorities.</p> <p>140 Furthermore, the very roughness and adventure of life of those days made people less sensitive to bodily pain that they are now. Their nerves were not so high-strung as ours are, so that the apprehension of torture or death did not weigh heavily upon them. Of this history affords abundant evidence.</p> <p>145 Death, moreover, to them seemed but a temporary interruption of the course of their life. Men in those days really conceived of the <i>continuity of life</i> as a simple and absolute fact. The belief in a future state had not as yet become a mere vague and metaphorical expression, as it is to-day, when no one attempts even in thought to realise it for himself; it was as real to them as palpable every-day matters. In this it will be evident that it was different from the spiritualised belief in a union with God or Christ which seems to have animated the early Christian, and which survived in some of the mediæval saints and mystics, such as St. Francis and St. Catherine of Siena.</p> <p>155 In short it is clear that such misery as // existed in the Middle Ages, was different in essence from that of our times; one piece of</p> <p>160</p> <p>165</p>	<p>170 evidence alone forces this conclusion upon us: the Middle Ages were essentially the epoch of <i>Popular Art</i>, the art of the people; whatever were the conditions of the life of the time, they produced an enormous volume of visible and tangible beauty, even taken <i>per se</i>, and still more extraordinary when considered beside the sparse population of those ages. The "misery" from amidst of which this came, whatever it was, must have been something totally unlike, and surely far less degrading than the misery of modern Whitechapel, from which not even the faintest scintilla of art can be struck, in spite of the idealising of slum life by the modern philanthropic sentimentalist and his allies, the impressionist novelist and painter.</p> <p>175 We have thought it necessary to meet objections as to over-valuing the importance of the Middle Ages, but it must be understood that we do not stand forward as apologists for them except in relation to modern times. The part which they played in the course of history // was not only necessary to the development of the life of the world, but was so special and characteristic that it will leave its mark on future ages in spite of the ignorant contemplation of them from which we are slowly emerging. They had their own faults and miseries, their own uses and advantages, and they left behind them works to show that at least happiness and cheerful intelligence were possible sometimes and somewhere in them, even amongst that working class, which now has to bear the whole burden of our follies and mistakes.</p> <p>180</p> <p>185</p> <p>190</p> <p>195</p> <p>200</p>
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Pp. 76-84, Chapter V "The Rough Side of the Middle Ages", in MORRIS, William, & BAX, E. Belfort, *Socialism, its Growth and Outcome*, London: Swann Sonnenschein & Co. Ltd, 1896 (2nd edn.), viii+336 p. The first edition was published in 1893. But this was based on a series of articles published by *Commonweal* as "Socialism from the Root Up" between 1886 and 1888. These original papers can be found on <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/index.htm>.

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