

CHAPTER III

THE MEDIÆVAL TOWN

CENTURIES of disorder followed the decline of the Roman Empire. All life was uncertain and the towns were small and poor. War, pillage, and famine checked the growth of population and wealth, while the absence of trade and industry prevented the growth of towns. The common people lived about the castle or under the protecting walls of an abbey, to secure such protection as it offered. The peasants worked the fields and in time of war fought for those within the castle. It was an old saying: "There is good living under the cross." For the church was a safe sanctuary. The area within the towns was restricted by walls so as to make defence as easy as possible. And defence was the primary consideration in the planning of the town. People lived closely packed together in houses whose upper stories projected out over the street, as they do to-day in the old parts of Frankfort, Nuremberg, and Rothenberg.

The Beginning of the Towns.

It was not until the tenth century that anything like municipal organization appeared. There was no commerce to speak of, and each community supplied its needs through the market-place, about which the farmers and artisans gathered to barter their wares.

The municipal awakening began in Italy and along the Mediterranean, where commerce with the East had survived the incursions of the barbarians. It gradually extended along the Danube and the Rhine and into Flanders and France. Along these routes towns were established, as they were about the Black Sea. By the thirteenth century municipal life was pretty well developed.

“The cities hummed like bees, the streets were still narrow, irregular and unsanitary, but they were teeming with life. Encumbering them were bales, baskets, venders crying their wares, and enormous signs swinging in the wind which sometimes imperilled the safety of passers-by. It was a new civilization bursting into bloom. Splendid monuments arose, attesting the public prosperity, and churches lifted towards heaven their domes, campaniles and spires; glorious belfries which dominated and threatened their surroundings awaiting the approaching time when the inimitable town halls, with their brilliant ornamentations of stone, should cause them to be forgotten. The town bell was the public voice of the city as the church was the voice of the soul. The city in the thirteenth century lived, spoke and acted. It was a new factor in society.”¹

Description of the Town.

The town was protected by walls entered at frequent intervals through massive gates. Frequently there was a series of encircling walls erected at different intervals as the town grew in population.

¹ *Emancipation of Medieval Towns*, by A. Gery and A. Reville, edited by Frank Greene Bates and Paul Emerson Titsworth, p. 67.

Round about the walls were moats filled with water and crossed by drawbridges. The sites of these old walls may still be seen in Cologne, Frankfort, Bremen, Munich, Nuremberg, and Vienna. The Ringstrasse of Vienna, probably the most beautiful street in the world, was laid out on the site of the fortifications which surrounded the old city up to as late as the middle of the last century.

Inside the town was a castle, or citadel, the last place of refuge in case of attack. It usually occupied the most inaccessible point and was still further protected by walls. In the watch-tower, which surmounted the town hall, were bells which warned the citizens of danger and were used to call them to the assembly. These bells also announced the hours of work in the morning and of rest in the evening. The tower, with the town seal, was an emblem of freedom. It was the first thing destroyed if the town was captured by an enemy.

The Town the Cradle of Liberty.

The trade of the East started a movement of emancipation from the feudal lords, who owned the land on which the towns were built, which continued for several centuries. Men began to travel from place to place. Peasants became artisans, merchants, and employers. In time the towns became rich, but the land on which they were built was still owned by the feudal lords, just as was the agricultural territory which surrounded them. The merchants were still vassals like the peasants in the fields; they were subjects of the overlord, upon

whose land the town came into existence. They enjoyed no political or social rights.

As the artisans became wealthy they resented their dependence. They protested against the dues they were compelled to pay; against the interference by the lord with their local affairs. They desired to manage their markets and to trade with other towns as they saw fit. They demanded guarantees of freedom, which they ultimately obtained, sometimes by purchase, sometimes by conquest. These guarantees were embodied in written charters, which are the origin of the charters which cities enjoy to-day.

The towns of Germany gradually divided into two general classes: those which were in substance free and independent republics, or *Freistädte*, directly dependent on the Emperor, and those which were partly free but owed some allegiance to ecclesiastical or lay overlords. The free cities provided their own form of government, they looked after their own defence, collected their own taxes, and knew no interference in the management of their affairs, whether domestic or foreign. In case of serious controversies they looked to the Emperor for protection and were willing to aid him in the preservation of the general order.

The Guilds.

Just as the population of Greece and Rome was divided into citizens and slaves, so the later mediæval city was divided into a caste system organized about industry. A merchant aristocracy arose. Trade and commerce, far from being despised callings as in

ancient times, were the dominating motive in the life of the community. The principal activities were gold and silver smithing, cloth making, saddlery, arms and iron working, and trading in all kinds of local and foreign commodities. Each trade was organized into a separate guild, which in many towns became a close corporation. To it men were admitted by birth, by purchase, and by adoption. Each trade or industry was organized by itself and was composed of the masters, who had a number of apprentices associated with them.

The guild was in reality a trade monopoly. It regulated all of the conditions of the industry. It determined the styles and fixed the prices to be charged. Each guild decided who should be admitted to its membership and the rules which governed it. It was possible for a newcomer to engage in a trade only with the consent of the guild which controlled it. No man could work as an artisan until he had served as an apprentice under the direction of a master. Everything was regulated and controlled.

The guilds formed the governing class, from which the aldermen and magistrates were selected. The city was almost wholly an agency of business, while citizenship was a privilege to which men were admitted through their occupations. This was particularly true of the cities of southern Germany and the Netherlands which were rich trading centres.

Citizenship.

In some towns citizenship was granted to the people of the town and suburbs; in some it was limited

to those within the walls. In others the suffrage was a privilege conferred on those who owned property or belonged to the guilds. Some communities excluded serfs, natural children, and debtors, and others the entire laboring class. The towns of the north usually refused the right of citizenship to nobles and churchmen. Nowhere did manhood suffrage, as we understand it, obtain, while the right of holding office was generally reserved to the well-to-do classes, which formed an aristocracy of wealth. Frequently they alone enjoyed the right of citizenship.

As the town grew in prosperity the merchants became more and more exclusive and the right of citizenship a commercial privilege. Ultimately almost all of the northern towns were governed by the merchant guilds or livery companies, although by the fourteenth century the artisan class had generally obtained some voice in the community's affairs.

Administration.

Administration was far from uniform. In some communes the government was vested in a general assembly of citizens which chose the magistrate and aided in the administration. In others the government was in a body of peers who held office for life and filled all vacancies within the body. In some of the northern towns the overlord reserved the right to select the magistrate, frequently from names submitted by the municipal assembly. The office of magistrate was usually reserved to the wealthy classes or to a few families which guarded the priv-

ilege jealously. Members of the artisan class were not eligible to office.

End of the Mediæval Period.

The mediæval city with its privileged guild organization continued down to the period of the French Revolution. For the most part it had lost the equality and freedom of earlier days and had become a close corporation and in many instances thoroughly corrupt.

The old type of town could not survive democracy on the one hand and industry on the other. The liberties of the burgher class had become special privileges which degenerated into the worst sort of abuses. The towns were governed under a restricted suffrage which in most instances was no suffrage at all. In addition, as the towns grew in population administration broke down. There was no provision for health or sanitation, no police or fire protection, no schools, no control over building or provision for the common decencies of life. Bad as were the conditions in the mediæval towns, it is probable that the city was never so inadequate to its needs as during the generation which followed the development of factory industry in England in the last quarter of the eighteenth and the first quarter of the nineteenth centuries.

Doctor Albert Shaw has described the conditions of the British city of the later mediæval period as follows:

“As for municipal conveniences, those were times when life was simple and ‘modern improve-

ments' not so much as dreamed about. The streets were narrow, with the houses built close upon them. The pavement was of the rudest character. There were simple surface drainage and no garbage removal or cleansing system. Water was supplied from a few town fountains or public wells. Street lighting had not been invented and early hours were prescribed. Most towns had a skirting of common lands where the cows were pastured and where in many cases fuel was procured. The houses were in large part built of wood, and in spite of vigilant 'watch and ward' and compulsory hearth precautions, destructive fires were not infrequent. The death rate, of course, was high. There was infection in the wells and no means of checking the spread and fatality of frequent 'plagues' that swept the towns. But the science of public sanitation being undiscovered, these things were accepted piously as inescapable visitations of God."¹

The Transition in England.

In the sixteenth century municipal corporations in England were largely self-governing. In them the love of freedom was nurtured. As time went on administration became incompetent and corrupt. The most flagrant abuses were prevalent. Electors were freely bribed and public moneys were wrongfully used. There were few citizens who enjoyed the suffrage, and they were used as part of a political machine for the maintenance of parliamentary majorities. Cities were pawns of the King or of political parties. They were little more than rotten boroughs in national politics. Suffrage was a matter

¹ *Municipal Government in Great Britain*, p. 21.

of birth, purchase, or co-optation. The town was governed by self-elected citizens and frequently by self-elected officials. Councilmen frequently held office for life. In case of vacancy the remaining councillors filled the office. As a consequence the towns lost the confidence of the people. The local regulations and ordinances were not obeyed. The towns had little revenues and but little authority. With but a few exceptions they were devoid of public spirit, wholly unrepresentative, and given over to the ruling caste.

Such were the conditions in Great Britain described by the royal commission which reported to Parliament in 1835. As a result of this investigation the Municipal Corporations Act of that year was passed, which remains, with subsequent changes, the municipal code of Great Britain.

Summary.

The mediæval town partook partly of the ancient, partly of the modern city. It was far from democratic and was organized along industrial caste lines. In its later development it was governed by the guilds, made up of the master merchants and craftsmen, under whom were apprentices and dependants, who enjoyed little or no share in the government.

And just as the ancient city reflected the ideal of leisure, so the mediæval city reflected the prevailing interest, which was trade and commerce, on the one hand, and religion on the other. Its great structures were dedicated to these ends, and much of the beauty of the old cities of Germany and the Netherlands is

a reflection of the life of the merchants of these ages.

The sites of early towns were fixed by military considerations. In later times trade routes and harbors fixed their location and growth. Cities were planned for protection and were close-walled within a limited area. They were devoid of comfort and conveniences but became the centres of a highly organized industrial life.

The movement for modern liberty began in the mediæval town. The bonds of feudalism were broken by the wealth and power of the burghers, who resented the taxes and dues imposed upon them by the overlords. Gradually they secured their freedom, sometimes by purchase, sometimes by conquest. Their rights were then inscribed in charters, which were the first guarantees of modern liberty.

The mediæval town was destroyed by modern industry, on the one hand, and by democracy on the other. The increasing urban population and the gradual liberalization of thought destroyed the caste-like corporations which existed all over Europe and led to the enactment of uniform municipal codes in England, France, and Germany in the early years of the nineteenth century.