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Concerning Sacrilege and its Consequences.

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WHEN "two priests of the Church of England," edited Sir Henry Spelman's "History and Fate of Sacrilege," it was, no doubt, with the feeling that the time had come when a warning for future generations should be uttered.

Abbeys and abbey lands are for the most part irrevocably lost, but there remain bishoprics, colleges and churches—which, had King Henry VIII. lived longer, would probably have shared the same fate as the monasteries—and English people are some sixty-four years or so nearer what seems likely to be the great act of spoliation of the twentieth century. What will be done with the confiscated revenues of our national Church, funds or lands given from time to time to the Church and for the Church's use by pious folk, who as little dreamed of the prospect of their being alienated from her, as did the hosts of persons who left money and endowed chantries so that Masses should be said for the repose of their souls, that a day would come when chapels and chantry priests should be swept away? Without embarking on the vexed question of disposing of the Church's property, we may very well remember what was accomplished in the sixteenth century—although King Henry solemnly affirmed in Parliament that he would "order the chantries, colleges, and hospitals, and other places"—given to him "to the glory of God and the profit of the commonwealth"—and strike at what is after all at the root of the matter, which is that any act which deprives the Church of what has been given for her use is sacrilege, and as such is bound to have its reward.

When, indeed, has sacrilege ever gone unpunished? Our author, the worthy knight who was possessed of the sites of two Norfolk abbeys which occasioned the expenditure of much money in law-suits, and who found himself to be far happier and more fortunate when eventually quit of them, traces back sacrilege to our common parents, Adam and Eve, and cites

instance after instance from the Old Testament to support his theory. Such examples—it is unnecessary to quote what will be immediately remembered—occur frequently throughout the Bible, always with retribution following upon them, most often in death, such as Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, Achan, who was stoned for taking what was consecrated to God, or Uzza, who stretched forth his hand to stay the ark; frequently in sudden disease, or in childlessness—an awful judgment for a Jew—or the final extinction of the entire family, as in the case of Jeroboam, who sacrilegiously made the golden calves for the Israelites to worship. Instances of sacrilege offered to the Temple at Jerusalem by invading armies are recited in the Books of Maccabees, and the punishment thereof, as for example the scourging of Heliodorus.

Sacrilege, however, was held by the Pagans to be quite as dreadful a sin, and quite as awfully rewarded; and often and often we read of the fate which befell heathen generals and commanders who fired or sacked temples and destroyed images. Never are they left unpunished; they fall into fearful straits; they are seized with madness or loathsome diseases, or are murdered by their sons; their children are killed, or suffer shipwreck, or destroy themselves. History, both ancient and modern, furnishes innumerable examples of sacrilege and its consequences—violent deaths, extraordinary accidents, insanity, absence of male heirs, poverty, and inability for estates to remain long in the same hands.

Naturally, that which has to do with our own country most concerns us, though there are striking examples in French history, and the misfortunes and ultimate fate of our royal race of Stuart are traced by Sir Henry Spelman in the most interesting manner from that hasty action of Robert the Bruce when he slew the Red Comyn in the very church. I suppose, too, that William the Conqueror is a fairly notable instance—he is at all events a popular one—and the belief that all his troubles were due to the destruction of churches in the New Forest is widely spread.

Most of all, however, do the annals of English history point to the spoliation of the Church when King Henry VIII. ordered the monasteries to be suppressed, and the consequences of such a wide-reaching act of sacrilege, to the Crown, the actual agents and benefactors, and to the nation. There are some people who assert that the monasteries had failed to fulfil their purpose, and so rightly received an end. There were notorious cases undoubtedly, but for the most part ecclesiastical establishments were centres of devotion, light, and learning—centres, too, where the poor were diligently relieved—the poor who by the Dissolution were spread broadcast over England without means of subsistence. The point, however, is not what the monasteries were in the sixteenth century, or whether they had served their office, but that they had been founded and endowed for the glory of God, and that what they contained had been given to Him and for His honour and worship, and that to take away and appropriate to lay hands and lay uses what was consecrated for this purpose was sacrilege. Let us see how this great sin was punished, for punished it was, and that in a sufficiently awful and lasting manner which has not yet been expiated in the twentieth century. Of the nobles who were the first original grantees of Church lands, all are extinct in the male line save eight, and of the terrible dooms in which their families were involved, the misfortunes, ruin, poverty, sin, and failure of heirs, Spelman gives a long and direful description. Enriched as they were who either bought or were granted the abbeys of the Church, it is an extraordinary fact that it seemed impossible for them to be kept in those families; instead of passing from father to son, they went from one person to another, bringing tribulation on all who possessed them. The absolute failure of male heirs is very marked in the numerous instances which Spelman recounts for our instruction; it appears, indeed, to be the common curse on those who own Church property, so that family after family is blotted out, even when five or six times over the same name has been taken by distant relatives or by the successors of female heiresses so as to preserve it.

We suppose that it is generally conceded that the possessor of Church land falls under the Church curse of fire and water, and many are the instances adduced in local histories or guide-books, the annals of noble families, and accounts of genealogies, in which these elements have played a prominent part. There are also, however, certain abbey lands which lie under a special curse, that of the abbot who was being ejected from his monastery and who solemnly cursed the invader and his successors; or a curse attached to lands, as is the case with the manor of Sherborne, given by William I. to Osmund, Earl of Dorset and Bishop of Sarum, and by him returned to the See, and protected by grievous penalties upon all who should alienate it from the bishopric. "That whosoever should take those lands from the bishopric, or diminish them in great or in small, should be accursed, not only in this world, but also in the world to come, unless in his lifetime he made restitution thereof."

The history of Sherborne Castle from the time when King Stephen reft it from Bishop Roger of Sarum is one long account of strife between the Bishops and such parties, and the misfortunes which befell those who attained it unlawfully.

The history of such curses is interesting and extraordinary, none perhaps more so than the story of that thirteenth-century Earl of Pembroke, who took two manors belonging to the Bishop of Fernes in Ireland. The Bishop, failing to receive them back, excommunicated the Earl and his son (who also refused restitution) after him in the words of the Psalm, "In a generation his name shall be put out," which accordingly happened, for within fifteen years all five brothers died childless.

All the mitred abbeys are instanced in this curious and awe-inspiring book which was "Published for the Terror of Evil Doers," and to which the two priests—the Rev. Dr. Neale and Rev. Joseph Haskoll—contributed much extra matter. We learn the fate of the grantees of Rievaulx, Bath, Fountains, Canterbury, Coventry, Tewkesbury, Shrewsbury, Evesham, Glastonbury, St. Albans and many more, both of well-known names of famous abbeys or of lesser foundations which now,

perhaps, are remembered only by the name of a street. With each and all the fate of the first owner is given, with much concerning their succeeding possessors, and it forms so awful a list of dire retribution that, were the book (the last edition was published about 1888) more widely known, we cannot help thinking that the subject might receive serious consideration, and some restitution, at least, be made to the Church. There are estates which everybody knows belonged to some once-celebrated monastery, but the partition and distribution of Church lands has been so great that it is almost impossible to say who, innocently enough, may not have them amongst his possessions. Certain it is that prosperity cannot attend those who, if not concerned with actual sacrilege, are yet parties to the sin in retaining what they know to have been originally consecrated for the service of God. It is difficult to urge a policy of absolute restitution, yet much might be done, especially to prevent the ruins of sacred abbey churches being given over to feasting and merriment on the part of thoughtless tourists.

A bright memory among such establishments is the use to which the Benedictine Abbey of St. Peter and St. Paul and St. Augustine at Canterbury has been put. When the great monastery was suppressed it was first used by the Crown, came into the possession of Lord Cobham, whose family became extinct in the male line, and changed hands with the customary frequency of Church property. After being desecrated for years it was bought by Mr. A. Beresford-Hope (to whom by a strange coincidence the editors of 1846 dedicated the "History and Fate of Sacrilege"), and was finally rebuilt and restored as the training quarters of men who should go out as missionaries to all the world.

Let us hope that such an example may lead others to the serious consideration of Church estates, and how they may still be consecrated to God's glory, and to understand that all which has once been devoted to Him can never pass into lay hands, or be put to lay uses, without being guilty of the sin of sacrilege and as surely reaping a just retribution.