

THE HISTORY  
OF  
PROTESTANTISM

BY THE  
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WITH FIVE HUNDRED AND FIFTY ILLUSTRATIONS  
*BY THE BEST ARTISTS*

“PROTESTANTISM, THE SACRED CAUSE OF GOD’S LIGHT AND TRUTH AGAINST THE  
DEVIL’S FALSITY AND DARKNESS.”—*Carlyle*

VOL. 1.

CASSELL AND COMPANY, LIMITED  
*LONDON, PARIS, NEW YORK & MELBOURNE*

1899

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## CHAPTER IV.

### WICLIFFE'S BATTLE WITH THE MENDICANT FRIARS.

Wicliffe's Mental Conflicts—Rise of the Monastic Orders—Fascinating Pictures of Monks and Monasteries—Early Corruption of the Orders—Testimony of Contemporary Witnesses—The New Monastic Orders—Reason for their Institution—St. Francis—His Early Life—His Appearance before Innocent III.—Commission to Found an Order—Rapid Increase of the Franciscans—St. Dominic—His Character—Founds the Dominicans—Preaching Missionaries and Inquisitors—Constitution of the New Orders—The Old and New Monks Compared—Their Vow of Poverty—How Evaded—Their Garb—Their Vast Wealth—Palatial Edifices—Their Frightful Degeneracy—Their Swarms Overspread England—Their Illegal Practices—The Battle against them Begun by Armachanus—He Complains against them to the Pope—His Complaint Disregarded—He Dies.

WE come now to relate briefly the second great battle which our Reformer was called to wage; and which, if we have regard to the prior date of its origin—for it was begun before the conclusion of that of which we have just spoken—ought to be called the first. We refer to his contest with the mendicant friars. It was still going on when his battle against the temporal power was finished; in fact it continued, more or less, to the end of his life. The controversy involved great principles, and had a marked influence on the mind of Wicliffe in the way of developing his views on the whole subject of the Papacy. From questioning the mere abuse of the Papal prerogative, he began to question its legitimacy. At every step a new doubt presented itself; this sent him back again to the Scriptures. Every page he read shed new light into his mind, and discovered some new invention or error of man, till at last he saw that the system of the Gospel and the system of the Papacy were utterly and irreconcilably at variance, and that if he would follow the one he must finally renounce the other. This decision, as we gather from Fox, was not made without many tears and groans. "After he had a long time professed divinity in Oxford," says the chronicler, "and perceiving the true doctrine of Christ's Gospel to be adulterate, and defiled with so many filthy inventions of bishops, sects of monks, and dark errors, and that he after long debating and deliberating with himself (with many secret sighs and bewailings in his mind the general ignorance of the whole world) could no longer suffer or abide the same, he at the last determined with himself to help and to remedy such things as he saw to be wide and out of the way. But forasmuch as he saw that this dangerous meddling could not be attempted or stirred without great trouble, neither that these things, which had been so long time with use and custom rooted and grafted in men's minds, could be suddenly plucked up or taken away, he thought with himself that this matter should be done by little and little. Wherefore he, taking his original at small occasions, thereby opened

himself a way or mean to greater matters. First he assailed his adversaries in logical and metaphysical questions . . . by these originals the way was made unto greater points, so that at length he came to touch the matters of the Sacraments, and other abuses of the Church.”<sup>1</sup>

The rise of the monastic orders, and their rapid and prodigious diffusion over all Christendom, and even beyond it, are too well known to require minute or lengthy narration. The tombs of Egypt, the deserts of Thebais, the mountains of Sinai, the rocks of Palestine, the islands of the Ægean and Tuscan Seas, were peopled with colonies of hermits and anchorites, who, fleeing from the world, devoted themselves to a life of solitude and spiritual meditation. The secularity and corruption of the parochial clergy, engendered by the wealth which flowed in upon the Church in early times, rendered necessary, it was supposed, a new order, which might exhibit a great and outstanding example of virtue. Here, in these anchorites, was the very pattern, it was believed, which the age needed. These men, living in seclusion, or gathered in little fraternities, had renounced the world, had taken a vow of poverty and obedience, and were leading humble, laborious, frugal, chaste, virtuous lives, and exemplifying, in a degenerate time, the holiness of the Gospel. The austerity and poverty of the monastery redeemed Christianity from the stain which the affluence and pride of the cathedral had brought upon it. So the world believed, and felt itself edified by the spectacle.

For a while, doubtless, the monastery was the asylum of a piety which had been banished from the world. Fascinating pictures have been drawn of the sanctity of these establishments. Within their walls peace made her abode when violence distracted the outer world. The land around them, from the skilful and careful cultivation of the brotherhood, smiled like a garden, while the rest of the soil, through neglect or barbarism, was sinking into a desert; here letters were cultivated, and the arts of civilised life preserved, while the general community, engrossed in war, prosecuted but languidly the labours of peace. To the gates of the monastery came the halt, the blind, the deaf; and the charitable inmates never failed to pity their misery and supply their necessities. In fine, while the castle of the neighbouring baron resounded with the clang of weapons, or the noise of wassail, the holy chimes ascending from the monastery at morn and eve, told of the devotions, the humble prayers, and the fervent praises in which the Fathers passed their time.

These pictures are so lovely, and one is so gratified to think that ages so rude, and so ceaselessly buffeted by war, had nevertheless their quiet retreats, where the din of arms did not drown the voice of the muses, or silence the song of piety, that we feel almost as if it were an offence against religion to doubt their truth. But we confess that our faith in them would have been

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<sup>1</sup> Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, vol. i., p. 556.

greater if they had been painted by contemporary chroniclers, instead of being mostly the creation of poets who lived in a later age. We really do not know where to look in real history for the originals of these enchanting descriptions. Still, we do not doubt that there is a measure of truth in them; that, during the early period of their existence, these establishments did in some degree shelter piety and preserve art, did dispense alms and teach industry. And we know that even down to nearly the Reformation there were instances of men who, hidden from the world, here lived alone with Christ, and fed their piety at the fountains of the Word of God. These instances were, however, rare, and suggested comparisons not favourable to the rest of the Fathers.

But one thing history leaves in no wise doubtful, even that the monastic orders speedily and to a fearful degree became corrupt. It would have been a miracle if it had been otherwise. The system was in violation of the fundamental laws of nature and of society, as well as of the Bible. How can virtue be cultivated apart from the exercise of it? If the world is a theatre of temptation, it is still more a school of discipline, and a nursery of virtue. "Living in them," says a nun of Cambray, a descendant of Sir Thomas More, "I can speak by experience, if one be not in a right course of prayer, and other exercises between God and our soul, one's nature groweth *much worse* than ever it would have been if she had lived in the world."<sup>2</sup> It is in society, not in solitude, that we can be trained to self-denial, to patience, to loving-kindness and magnanimity. In solitude there is nothing to be borne with or overcome, save cold, or hunger, or the beasts of the desert, which, however much they may develop the powers of the body, cannot nourish the virtues of the soul.

In point of fact, these monasteries did, we know, become eventually more corrupt than the world which their inmates had forsaken. By the year 1100 one of their advocates says he gives them up.<sup>3</sup> The pictures which some Popish writers have given us of them in the thirteenth century—Clemangis, for instance—we dare not transfer to our pages. The repute of their piety multiplied the number of their patrons, and swelled the stream of their benefactions. With riches came their too frequent concomitants, luxury and pride. Their vow of poverty was no barrier; for though, as individuals, they could possess no property, they might as a body corporate own any amount of wealth. Lands, houses, hunting-grounds, and forests; the tithings of tolls, of

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<sup>2</sup> Gertrude More, *Confessions*, p. 246.

<sup>3</sup> "One great butt of Wicliffe's sarcasm," says Lechler, "was the monks. Once, in speaking of the prayers of the monks, he remarked, 'a great inducement to the founding of cloisters was the delusion that the prayers of the inmates were of more value than all worldly goods, and yet it does not seem as if the prayers of those cloistered people are so mightily powerful; nor can we understand why they should be so, unless God hears them for their rosy cheeks and fat lips.'" (Lechler, vol. i., p. 737.)

orchards, of fisheries, of kine, and wool, and cloth, formed the dowry of the monastery. The vast and miscellaneous inventory of goods which formed the common property of the fraternity, included everything that was good for food and pleasant to the eye; curious furniture for their apartments, dainty apparel for their persons; the choice treasures of the field, of the tree, and the river, for their tables; soft-paced mules by day, and luxurious couches at night. Their head, the abbot, equalled princes in wealth, and surpassed them in pride. Such, from the humble beginnings of the cell, with its bed of stone and its diet of herbs, had come to be the condition of the monastic orders long before the days of Wicliffe. From being the ornament of Christianity, they were now its opprobrium; and from being the buttress of the Church of Rome, they had now become its scandal.

We shall quote the testimony of one who was not likely to be too severe in reproving the manners of his brethren. Peter, Abbot of Cluny, thus complains: “Our brethren despise God, and having passed all shame, eat flesh now all the days of the week except Friday. They run here and there, and, as kites and vultures, fly with great swiftness where the most smoke of the kitchen is, and where they smell the best roast and boiled. Those that will not do as the rest, they mock and treat as hypocrites and profane. Beans, cheese, eggs, and even fish itself, can no more please their nice palates; they only relish the flesh-pots of Egypt. Pieces of boiled and roasted pork, good fat veal, otters and hares, the best geese and pullets, and, in a word, all sorts of flesh and fowl do now cover the tables of our holy monks. But why do I talk? Those things are grown too common, they are cloyed with them. They must have something more delicate. They would have got for them kids, harts, boars, and wild bears. One must for them beat the bushes with a great number of hunters, and by the help of birds of prey must one chase the pheasants, and partridges, and ring-doves, for fear the servants of God (who are our good monks) should perish with hunger.”<sup>4</sup>

St. Bernard, in the twelfth century, wrote an apology for the monks of Cluny, which he addressed to William, Abbot of St. Thierry. The work was undertaken on purpose to recommend the order, and yet the author cannot restrain himself from reproving the disorders which had crept into it; and having broken ground on this field, he runs on like one who found it impossible to stop. “I can never enough admire,” says he, “how so great a licentiousness of meals, habits, beds, equipages, and horses, can get in and be established as it were among monks.” After enlarging on the sumptuousness of the apparel of the Fathers, the extent of their stud, the rich trappings of their mules, and the luxurious furniture of their chambers, St. Bernard proceeds to speak of their meals, of which he gives a very lively description. “Are not their mouths and ears,” says he, “equally filled with victuals and confused voices?”

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<sup>4</sup>Petrus Abbas Cluniaci, lib. vi., epit. 7; *apud* Gabriel d’Emillianne, p. 92.

And while they thus spin out their immoderate feasts, is there anyone who offers to regulate the debauch? No, certainly. Dish dances after dish, and for abstinence, which they profess, two rows of fat fish appear swimming in sauce upon the table. Are you cloyed with these? the cook has art sufficient to prick you others of no less charms. Thus plate is devoured after plate, and such natural transitions are made from one to the other, that they fill their bellies, but seldom blunt their appetites. And all this,” exclaims St. Bernard, “in the name of charity, because consumed by men who had taken a vow of poverty, and must needs therefore be denominated ‘the poor.’”

From the table of the monastery, where we behold course following course in quick and bewildering succession, St. Bernard takes us next to see the pomp with which the monks ride out. “I must always take the liberty,” says he, “to inquire how the salt of the earth comes to be so depraved. What occasions men, who in their lives ought to be examples of humility, by their practice to give instructions and examples of vanity? And to pass by many other things, what a proof of humility is it to see a vast retinue of horses with their equipage, and a confused train of valets and footmen, so that the retinue of a single abbot outshines that of two bishops! May I be thought a liar if it be not true, that I have seen one single abbot attended by above sixty horse. Who could take these men for the fathers of monks, and the shepherds of souls? Or who would not be apt to take them rather for governors of cities and provinces? Why, though the master be four leagues off, must his train of equipage reach to his very doors? One would take these mighty preparations for the subsistence of an army, or for provisions to travel through a very large desert.”<sup>5</sup>

But this necessitated a remedy. The damage inflicted on the Papacy by the corruption and notorious profligacy of the monks must be repaired—but how? The reformation of the early orders was hopeless; but new fraternities could be called into existence. This was the method adopted. The order of Franciscans was instituted by Innocent III. in the year 1215, and the Dominicans were sanctioned by his successor Honorius III. a few years later (1218).<sup>6</sup> The object of their institution was to recover, by means of their humility, poverty, and apostolic zeal, the credit which had been lost to the Church through the pride, wealth, and indolence of the elder monks. Moreover, the new times on which the Church felt that she was entering, demanded new services. Preachers were needed to confute the heretics, and this was carefully kept in view in the constitution of the newly-created orders.

The founders of these two orders were very unlike in their natural disposition and temper.

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<sup>5</sup> Dupin, *Life of St. Bernard*, cent. 12, chap. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Dupin, *Eccles. Hist.*, cent. 13, chap 10.

St. Francis, the founder of the Franciscans, or Minorites, as they came to be termed, was born at Assisi, in Umbria, in 1182. His father was a rich merchant of that town. The historians of St. Francis relate that certain signs accompanied his birth, which prognosticated his future greatness. His mother, when her time had come, was taken in labour so severe, and her pains were prolonged for so many days, that she was on the point of death. At that crisis an angel, in the guise of a pilgrim, presented himself at her door, and demanded alms. The charity sought was instantly bestowed, and the grateful pilgrim proceeded to tell the inmates what they must do in order that the lady of the mansion might become the joyful mother of a son. They were to take up her couch, carry her out, and lay her in the stable. The pilgrim's instructions were followed, the pains of labour were now speedily ended, and thus it came to pass that the child first saw the light among the "beasts." "This was the first prerogative," remarks one of his historians, "in which St. Francis resembled Jesus Christ—he was born in a stable."<sup>7</sup>

Despite these auguries, betokening a more than ordinary sanctity, Francis grew up "a debauched youth," says D'Emillianne, "and, having robbed his father, was disinherited, but he seemed not to be very much troubled at it."<sup>8</sup> He was seized with a malignant fever, and the frenzy that it induced appears never to have wholly left him. He lay down on his bed of sickness a gay profligate and spendthrift, and he rose up from it entirely engrossed with the idea that all holiness and virtue consisted in poverty.

He acted out his theory to the letter. He gave away all his property, he exchanged garments with a beggar whom he met on the highway; and, squalid, emaciated, covered with dirt and rags, his eyes burning with a strange fire, he wandered about the country around his native town of Assisi, followed by a crowd of boys, who hooted and jeered at the madman, which they believed him to be. Being joined by seven disciples, he made his way to Rome, to lay his project before the Pope. On arriving there he found Innocent III. airing himself on the terrace of his palace of the Lateran.

What a subject for a painter! The haughtiest of the Pontiffs—the man who, like another Jove, had but to nod and kings were tumbled from their thrones, and nations were smitten down with interdict—was pacing to and fro beneath the pillared portico of his palace, revolving, doubtless, new and mightier projects to illustrate the glory and strengthen the dominion of the Papal throne. At times his eye wanders as far as the Apennines, so grandly walling in the

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<sup>7</sup> *Storia degli Ordini Monastici, Religiosi, e Militari, &c.*, tradotto dal Franzese del P. Giuseppe Francesco Fontana, Milanese, tom. vii., cap. 1, p. 2; edit. Lucca, 1739, cou licenza de Superiori.

<sup>8</sup> Gabriel d'Emillianne, *History of Monastical Orders*, p. 158; Lond., 1693. Francesco Fontana, *Storia degli Ordini Monastici*, tom. vii., cap. 1, pp. 6, 7. Alban Butler, *Lives of the Saints*, vol. x., p. 71; Lond., 1814.

Campagna, which lies spread out beneath him—not as now, a blackened expanse, but a glorious garden sparkling with villas, and gay with vineyards and olive and fig-trees. If in front of his palace was this goodly prospect, behind it was another, forming the obverse of that on which the Pontiff's eye now rested. A hideous gap, covered with the fragments of what had once been temples and palaces, and extending from the Lateran to the Coliseum, marred the beauty of the Pontifical city. This unsightly spectacle was the memorial of the war of Investitures, and would naturally carry the thoughts of Innocent back to the times of Hildebrand, and the fierce struggles which his zeal for the exaltation of the Papal chair had provoked in Christendom.

What a tide of prosperous fortune had flowed in upon Rome, during the century which had elapsed since Gregory VII. swayed the sceptre that Innocent now wielded! Not a Pontificate, not a decade, that had not witnessed an addition to the height of that stupendous Babel which the genius and statesmanship of all the Popes from Gregory to Innocent had been continuously and successfully occupied in rearing. And now the fabric stood complete, for higher it was hardly possible to conceive of its being carried. Rome was now more truly mistress of the world than even in the days of the Cæsars. Her sway went deeper into the heart and soul of the nations. Again was she sending forth her legates, as of old her pro-consuls, to govern her subject kingdoms; again was she issuing her edicts, which all the world obeyed; again were kings and suppliant princes waiting at her gates; again were her highways crowded with ambassadors and suitors from every quarter of Christendom; from the most distant regions came the pilgrim and the devotee to pray at her holy shrines; night and day, without intermission, there flowed from her gates a spiritual stream to refresh the world; crosiers and palls, priestly offices and mystic virtues, pardons and dispensations, relics and amulets, benedictions and anathemas; and, in return for this, the tribute of all the earth was being carried into her treasuries. On these pleasurable subjects, doubtless, rested the thoughts of Innocent as Francis of Assisi drew near.

The eye of the Pontiff lights upon the strange figure. Innocent halts to survey more closely the man. His dress is that of a beggar, his looks are haggard, his eye is wild, yet despite these untoward appearances there is something about him that seems to say, "I come with a mission, and therefore do I venture into this presence. I am here not to beg, but to give alms to the Popedom;" and few kings have had it in their power to lay greater gifts at the feet of Rome than that which this man in rags had come to bestow. Curious to know what he would say, Innocent permitted his strange visitor to address him. Francis hurriedly described his project; but the Pope failed to comprehend its importance, or to credit Francis with the power of carrying it out; he ordered the enthusiast to be gone; and Francis retired, disappointed and



downcast, believing his scheme to be nipped in the bud.<sup>9</sup>

The incident, however, had made a deeper impression upon the Pontiff than he was aware. As he lay on his couch by night, the beggar seemed again to stand before him, and to plead his cause. A palm-tree—so Innocent thought in his sleep—suddenly sprang up at his feet, and waxed into a goodly stature. In a second dream Francis seemed to stretch out his hand to prop up the Lateran, which was menaced with overthrow.<sup>10</sup> When the Pope awoke, he gave orders to seek out the strange man from Umbria, and bring him before him. Convening his cardinals, he gave them an opportunity of hearing the project. To Innocent and his conclave the idea of Francis appeared to be good; and to whom, thought they, could they better commit the carrying of it out than to the enthusiast who had conceived it? To this man in rags did Rome now give her commission. Armed with the Pontifical sanction, empowering him to found, arrange, and set a-working such an order as he had sketched out, Francis now left the presence of the Pope and cardinals, and departed to begin his work.<sup>11</sup>

The enthusiasm that burned so fiercely in his own brain kindled a similar enthusiasm in that of others. Soon St. Francis found a dozen men willing to share his views and take part in his project. The dozen speedily multiplied into a hundred, and the hundred into thousands, and the increase went on at a rate of which history scarcely affords another such example. Before his death, St. Francis had the satisfaction of seeing 5,000 of his monks assemble in his convent in Italy to hold a general chapter, and as each convent sent only two delegates, the convocation represented 2,500 convents.<sup>12</sup> The solitary fanatic had become an army; his disciples filled all the countries of Christendom; every object and idea they subordinated to that of their chief; and, bound together by their vow, they prosecuted with indefatigable zeal the service to which they had consecrated themselves. This order has had in it five Popes and forty-five cardinals.<sup>13</sup>

St. Dominic, the founder of the Dominicans, was born in Arragon, 1170. He was cast in a different mould from St. Francis. His enthusiasm was as fiery, his zeal as intense;<sup>14</sup> but to these qualities he added a cool judgment, a firm will, a somewhat stern temper, and great knowledge of affairs. Dominic

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<sup>9</sup> *Storia degli Ordini Monastici*, tom. vii., cap. 1, p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* Alb. Butler, *Lives of the Saints*, vol. x., p. 77.

<sup>11</sup> Dupin, *Eccles. Hist.*, cent. 13, vol. xi., chap. 10; Lond., 1699. *Storia degli Ordini Monastici*, tom. vii., cap. 1, pp. 14, 15.

<sup>12</sup> *Storia degli Ordini Monastici*, tom. vii., cap. 1, p. 19. Gabriel d'Emillianne, *Hist. of Monast. Orders*, p. 171.

<sup>13</sup> Alb. Butler, *Lives of the Saints*, v. 10, p. 100.

<sup>14</sup> Gabriel d'Emillianne, *Hist. of Monast. Orders*. This author says that the mother of St. Dominic before his birth dreamed that she was brought to bed of a dog (some say a wolf) carrying a burning torch in its mouth, wherewith it set the world on fire (p. 147).

had witnessed the ravages of heresy in the southern provinces of France; he had also had occasion to mark the futility of those splendidly equipped missions, that Rome sent forth from time to time to convert the Albigenses. He saw that these missionaries left more heretics on their departure than they had found on their arrival. Mitred dignitaries, mounted on richly caparisoned mules, followed by a sumptuous train of priests and monks, and other attendants, too proud or too ignorant to preach, and able only to dazzle the gaze of the multitude by the magnificence of their ceremonies, attested most conclusively the wealth of Rome, but did not attest with equal conclusiveness the truth of her tenets. Instead of bishops on palfreys, Dominic called for monks in wooden soles to preach to the heretics.

Repairing to Rome, he too laid his scheme before Innocent, offering to raise an army that would perambulate Europe in the interests of the Papal See, organised after a different fashion, and that, he hoped, would be able to give a better account of the heretics. Their garb as humble, their habits as austere, and their speech as plain as those of the peasants they were to address, these missionaries would soon win the heretics from the errors into which they had been seduced; and, living on alms, they would cost the Papal exchequer nothing. Innocent, for some reason or other, perhaps from having sanctioned the Franciscans so recently, refused his consent. But Pope Honorius was more compliant; he confirmed the proposed order of Dominic; and from beginnings equally small with those of the Franciscans, the growth of the Dominicans in popularity and numbers was equally rapid.<sup>15</sup>

The Dominicans were divided into two bands. The business of the one was to preach, that of the other to slay those whom the first were not able to convert.<sup>16</sup> The one refuted heresy, the other exterminated heretics. This happy division of labour it was thought, would secure the thorough doing of the work. The preachers rapidly multiplied, and in a few years the sound of their voices was heard in almost all the cities of Europe. Their learning was small, but their enthusiasm kindled them into eloquence, and their harangues were listened to by admiring crowds. The Franciscans and Dominicans did for the Papacy in the centuries that preceded the Reformation, what the Jesuits have done for it in the centuries that have followed it.

Before proceeding to speak of the battle which Wicliffe was called to wage with the new fraternities, it is necessary to indicate the peculiarities in their constitution and organisation that fitted them to cope with the emergencies amid which their career began, and which had made it necessary to call them into existence. The elder order of monks were recluses. They had no relation

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<sup>15</sup> Gabriel d'Emillianne, *Hist. of Monast. Orders*, p. 148.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* "A. troop of merciless fellows, whom he [St. Dominic] maintained to cut the throats of heretics when he was a-preaching; he called them the *Militia of Jesus Christ.*"

to the world which they had abandoned, and no duties to perform to it, beyond the example of austere piety which they offered for its edification. Their sphere was the cell, or the walls of the monastery, where their whole time was presumed to be spent in prayer and meditation.

The newly-created orders, on the other hand, were not confined to a particular spot. They had convents, it is true, but these were rather hotels or temporary abodes, where they might rest when on their preaching tours. Their sphere was the world; they were to perambulate provinces and cities, and to address all who were willing to listen to them. Preaching had come to be one of the lost arts. The secular or parochial clergy seldom entered a pulpit; they were too ignorant to write a sermon, too indolent to preach one even were it prepared to their hand. They instructed their flocks by a service of ceremonials, and by prayers and litanies, in a language which the people did not understand. Wicliffe assures us that in his time “there were many unable curates that knew not the ten commandments, nor could read their psalter, nor could understand a verse of it.”<sup>17</sup> The friars, on the other hand, betook themselves to their mother tongue, and, mingling familiarly with all classes of the community, they revived the forgotten practice of preaching, and plied it assiduously Sunday and week-day. They held forth in all places, as well as on all days, erecting their pulpit in the market, at the street-corner, or in the chapel.

In one point especially the friars stood out in marked and advantageous contrast to the old monastic orders. The latter were scandalously rich, the former were severely and edifyingly poor. They lived on alms, and literally were beggars; hence their name of *Mendicants*. Christ and His apostles, it was affirmed, were mendicants; the profession, therefore, was an ancient and a holy one. The early monastic orders, it is true, equally with the Dominicans and Franciscans, had taken a vow of poverty; but the difference between the elder and the later monks lay in this, that while the former could not in their individual capacity possess property, in their corporate capacity they might and did possess it to an enormous amount; the latter, both as individuals and as a body, were disqualified by their vow from holding any property whatever. They could not so much as possess a penny in the world; and as there was nothing in their humble garb and frugal diet to belie their profession of poverty, their reputation for sanctity was great, and their influence with all classes was in proportion. They seemed the very men for the times in which their lot was cast, and for the work which had been appointed them. They were emphatically the soldiers of the Pope, the household troops of the Vatican,

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<sup>17</sup> Lewis, *Life of Wicliffe*, p. 40. By a council held in Oxford, 1222, it was provided that the archdeacons in their visitations should “see that the clergy knew how to pronounce aright the form of baptism, and say the words of consecration in the canon of the mass.”

traversing Christendom in two bands, yet forming one united army, which continually increased, and which, having no *impedimenta* to retard its march, advanced alertly and victoriously to combat heresy, and extended the fame and dominion of the Papal See.

If the rise of the Mendicant orders was unexampled in its rapidity, equally unexampled was the rapidity of their decline. The rock on which they split was the same which had proved so fatal to their predecessors—riches. But how was it possible for wealth to enter when the door of the monastery was so effectually barred by a most stringent vow of poverty? Neither as individuals nor as a corporation, could they accept or hold a penny. Nevertheless, the fact was so; their riches increased prodigiously, and their degeneracy, consequent thereon, was even more rapid than the declension which former ages had witnessed in the Benedictines and Augustinians.

The original constitution of the Mendicant orders remained unaltered, their vow of poverty still stood unrepealed; they still lived on the alms of the faithful, and still wore their gown of coarse woollen cloth,<sup>18</sup> white in the case of the Dominicans, and girded with a broad sash; brown in the case of the Franciscans, and tied with a cord of three knots: in both cases curiously provided with numerous and capacious pouches, in which little images, square bits of paper, amulets, and rosaries, were mixed with bits of bread and cheese, morsels of flesh, and other victuals collected by begging.<sup>19</sup>

But in the midst of all these signs of poverty, and of the professed observance of their vow, their hoards increased every day. How came this? Among the brothers were some subtle intellects, who taught them the happy distinction between *proprietors* and *stewards*. In the character of proprietors they could possess absolutely nothing; in the character of stewards they might hold wealth to any amount, and dispense it for the ends and uses of their order.<sup>20</sup> This ingenious distinction unlocked the gates of their convents, and straightway a stream of gold, fed by the piety of their admirers, began to flow into them. They did not, like the other monastic fraternities, become landed proprietors—this kind of property not coming within the scope of that interpretation by which they had so materially qualified their vow—but in other respects they claimed a very ample freedom. The splendour of their edifices eclipsed those of the Benedictines and Augustinians. Churches which

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<sup>18</sup> Their habit or dress is described by Chaucer as consisting of a great hood, a scaplerie, a knotted girdle, and a wide cope. (*Jack Upland*.)

<sup>19</sup> The curiously knotted cord with which they gird themselves, “they say, hath virtue to heal the sick, to chase away the devil and all dangerous temptations, and serve what turn they please.” (Gabriel d’Emillianne, *Hist. of Monast. Orders*, p. 174.)

<sup>20</sup> This distinction is sanctioned by the *Constitution* issued by Nicholas III. in 1279, explaining and confirming the *rule* of St. Francis. This Constitution is still extant in the *Jus. Canon.*, lib. vi., tit. xii., cap. 3, commonly called *Constitution Exiit*, from its commencing, *Exiit, &c.*

the skill of the architect and the genius of the painter did their utmost to glorify, convents and cloisters which monarchs might have been proud to inhabit,<sup>21</sup> rose in all countries for the use of the friars. With this wealth came a multiform corruption—indolence, insolence, a dissolution of manners, and a grievous abuse of those vast privileges and powers which the Papal See, finding them so useful, had heaped upon them. “It is an awful presage,” exclaims Matthew Paris, only forty years after their institution, “that in 300 years, nay, in 400 years and more, the old monastic orders have not so entirely degenerated as these fraternities.”

Such was the state in which Wicliffe found the friars. Nay, we may conclude that in his time the corruption of the Mendicants far exceeded what it was in the days of Matthew Paris, a century earlier. He found in fact a plague fallen upon the kingdom, which was daily spreading and hourly intensifying its ravages. It was in 1360 that he began his public opposition to them. The Dominican friars entered England in 1321. In that year Gilbert de Fresney and twelve of his brethren settled at Oxford.<sup>22</sup> The same causes that favoured their growth on the Continent operated equally in England, and this little band recruited their ranks so rapidly, that soon they spread their swarms over all the kingdom. Forty-three houses of the Dominicans were established in England, where, from their black cloak and hood, they were popularly termed the Black Friars.<sup>23</sup>

Finding themselves now powerful, they attacked the laws and privileges of the University of Oxford, where they had established themselves, claiming independence of its jurisdiction. This drew on a battle between them and the college authorities. The first to oppose their encroachments was Fitzralph (Armachanus), who had been appointed to the chancellorship of Oxford in 1333, and in 1347 became Archbishop of Armagh. Fitzralph declared that under this “pestiferous canker,” as he styled mendicancy, everything that was good and fair—letters, industry, obedience, morals—was being blighted. He carried his complaints all the way to Avignon, where the Popes then lived, in the hope of effecting a reformation of this crying evil. The heads of the address which he delivered before the Pontiff were as follow:—That the friars were propagating a pestiferous doctrine, subversive of the testament of Jesus

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<sup>21</sup> No traveller can have passed from Perugia to Temi without having had his attention called to the convent of St. Francis d’Assisi, which stands on the lower slope of the Apennines, overlooking the vale of the Clitumnus. It is in splendour a palace, and in size it is almost a little town. In this magnificent edifice is the tomb of the man who died under a borrowed cloak.

<sup>22</sup> Vaughan, *Life of Wicliffe*, vol. i., pp. 250, 251.

<sup>23</sup> Sharon Turner, *Hist. of England*, vol. v., p. 101; Lond., 1830. “This order hath given to the Church 5 Popes, 48 cardinals, 23 patriarchs, 1,500 bishops, 600 archbishops, and a great number of eminent doctors and writers.” (Alban Butler.)

Christ; that, owing to their machinations, the ministers of the Church were decreasing; that the universities were decaying; that students could not find books to carry on their studies; that the friars were recruiting their ranks by robbing and circumventing children; that they cherished ambition under a feigned humility, that they concealed riches under a simulated poverty; and crept up by subtle means to be lords, archbishops, cardinals, chancellors of kingdoms, and privy councillors of monarchs’.

We must give a specimen of his pleading before the Pontiff, as Fox has preserved it. “By the privileges,” says Armachanus, “granted by the Popes to the friars, great enormities do arise.” Among other abuses, he enumerates the following:—“The true shepherds do not know the faces of their flock. Item, great contention and sometimes blows arise between the friars and the secular curates, about titles, impropriations, and other avails. Item, divers young men, as well in universities as in their fathers’ houses, are allured craftily by the friars, their confessors, to enter their orders; from whence, also, they cannot get out, though they would, to the great grief of their parents, and no less repentance to the young men themselves. No less inconvenience and danger also by the said friars riseth to the clergy, forsomuch as laymen, seeing their children thus to be stolen from them in the universities by the friars, do refuse therefore to send them to their studies, rather willing to keep them at home to their occupation, or to follow the plough, than so to be circumvented and defeated of their sons at the university, as by daily experience doth manifestly appear. For, whereas, in my time there were in the university of Oxford 30,000 students, now there are not to be found 6,000. The occasion of this great decay is to be ascribed to no other cause than the circumvention only of the friars above mentioned.”

As the consequence of these very extraordinary practices of the friars, every branch of science and study was decaying in England. “For that these begging friars,” continues the archbishop, “through their privileges obtained of the Popes to preach, to hear confessions, and to bury, and through their charters of impropriations, did thereby grow to such great riches and possessions by their begging, craving, catching, and intermeddling with Church matters, that no book could stir of any science, either of divinity, law, or physic, but they were both able and ready to buy it up. So that every convent having a great library, full, stuffed, and furnished with all sorts of books, and being so many convents within the realm, and in every convent so many friars increasing daily more and more, by reason thereof it came to pass that very few books or none at all remain for other students.”

“He himself sent to the university four of his own priests or chaplains, who sent him word again that they neither could find the Bible, nor any other good profitable book of divinity profitable for their study, and so they returned to

their own country.”<sup>24</sup>

In vain had the archbishop undertaken his long journey. In vain had he urged these complaints before the Pontiff at Avignon. The Pope knew that these charges were but too well-founded; but what did that avail? The friars were indispensable to the Pope; they had been created by him, they were dependent upon him, they lived for him, they were his obsequious tools; and weighed against the services they were rendering to the Papal throne, the interests of literature in England were but as dust in the balance. Not a finger must be lifted to curtail the privileges or check the abuses of the Mendicants. The archbishop, finding that he had gone on a bootless errand, returned to England, and died three years after.

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<sup>24</sup> Fox, *Acts and Mon.*, bk. v. See there the story of Armachanus and his oration against the friars.