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DEMOCRACY

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PREFACE

DEMOCRACY is treated in this book mainly as a problem of political philosophy and not merely as a system of government. The institutions which are usually called democratic are therefore discussed only in reference to the purpose or ideal for which they were devised. A fuller description of these institutions can be found elsewhere, especially in such books of this Series as Sir Courtenay Ilbert's *Parliament*. The principles upon which public discussion, criticism of authorities and the removal of those in control of government, at the will of the governed, seem to be in doubt in some circles to-day. A book on democracy, therefore, cannot be a colourless scientific analysis, but must involve some psychological discussion and some moral judgment.

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CHAPTER I

THE BEGINNING OF DEMOCRACY

I

DEMOCRACY is a word with many meanings and some emotional colour. It is not an algebraical symbol, but a flag or the call of a trumpet for some ; and for others an obsolete mythology, which has undesirable connections with capitalism and imperialism. The subject of this book, then, is not to be found in a dictionary, but only in the passions and prejudices, the customs and beliefs of living men and women. To discover what democracy means, it is best to look round us, at what men and women are doing. It is almost useless to discuss the derivation of the word. In some countries ordinary men and women have a share in political power through representative assemblies and responsible ministers : these countries are democratic. But among the greater part of mankind the

community is controlled by a few uncriticized and absolute rulers ; and in some countries recently the older form of political power has been revived.

Twenty years ago the principles of democracy were regarded by most people in the Western world as obvious platitudes. It was supposed that, although men were not altogether rational, they were at least not ashamed of such little reasoning as they could do. It was imagined that, if one wanted to go anywhere, it would be better to go of one's self than to be driven. The more extremely " advanced " used to say that it was better to persuade ordinary folk than to compel them to do what was good for themselves or for others. And the institutions, especially the political institutions, generally called democratic, were supposed to give play to a certain amount of reasoning and spontaneity in common folk and to assist discussion between those whose views differed, as a preliminary to decisions about public policy. But it is dangerous to treat any principles—even those of arithmetic, as platitudes ; because

if we do so, we forget that they were once discoveries made by deliberate effort, and not truths revealed without reasoning, imagination and experiment. For example, even multiplication by numbers above ten was too difficult for ordinary folk until the sixteenth century; but we treat it as easy enough now. In government many different methods have been tried, in order to promote mutual help among neighbours; and some advance in the art had been made in the nineteenth century. The long history of the art of government has sometimes involved the use of religion and poetry. But fear, greed and reckless devotion have all been used for keeping order and for improving social relationships. Some men have made themselves into rulers; and in other cases the rulers have been brought into power by chance or by groups which looked for leadership. And the forms of government have changed much oftener than the kinds of religion or the ways of getting and using food and clothing. But after many experiments, a new form of government called "demo-

cracy " began to be consciously adopted at the end of the eighteenth century in Europe. The name given to this new system for ruling and being ruled was taken from the Greek, because the political thinking of that time was dominated by a revived interest in the old slave-civilization of Greece and Rome; and because the thinkers of the eighteenth century, who desired social reforms, looked to Greek and Roman literature for lessons in methods of displacing personal caprice as the basis of government. The alternative seemed to be the rule of " the people," which was supposed to have been practised in slave-owning Athens and Rome. In Athens and Rome, freedom and equality were privileges of a few male householders who ruled the rest, but these few shared political power.

II

The practices of ancient Athens and Rome are largely irrelevant in our day, because slavery is not openly accepted: and references to these practices have been obstructive in the recent past, in the effort

to reach what we mean by democracy by the elimination of poverty, oppression and war. These three great evils are irreconcilable with "democracy" in our sense, but were assumed to exist in all ancient forms of government. For this among other reasons the earliest forms of government called "democratic" need not be discussed. After the disappearance of the Greek-Roman civilization in the Dark Ages, feudalism—or public authority based upon the service of persons and the inheritance of land—was almost universal in the West. But in the fourteenth century of our era, a new form of government was developed among the traders and craftsmen of some small cities. In Italy, especially in such cities as Florence, Siena, Venice and Genoa, the art of government was advanced by co-operation between equals, as an escape from the lordships of Europe. Small areas in Switzerland also were governed by groups of equals,—peasants and craftsmen: and in the Netherlands, at a slightly later date, the cities made progress in material and spiritual civilization

under the control of a " democracy " of local traders. In the Hansa cities of Germany the same experiment in government was made. It was " democracy " in the sense of control over public affairs by a group of free and equal citizens. But the power of these men depended upon their property ; and they ruled over a majority of fellow inhabitants of their cities, as a sort of oligarchy.

Mediæval city-democracy was overwhelmed by the development of autocracies in the new " nations " of Europe in the sixteenth century. But the power to criticize and make suggestions to the autocrat or sovereign was derived from the experience of the consultation of those who owed allegiance by the local lord, and used especially in England. The English Parliament, which had been merely a means for the king to obtain more money and for his subjects to attach conditions to their payment, became a means for discussing and criticizing all public policy. But this is one essential of what is now called democracy—the criticism of established authority and

the free discussion of public policy. And although the Parliament before the late nineteenth century expressed mainly the opinions of landowners and traders, its methods were adapted later to the expression of a more generally shared opinion. Secondly, the mediæval and Renaissance Assemblies of representatives, and especially the English Parliament, established the " rule of law " in place of the caprice of the ruler. This is " civil liberty," which has become another of the basic elements in democracy. As Herodotus had said of the Athenians, to have the law as a master meant liberty. It meant that each man and woman in the community had security against violence and arbitrary power, had the right to trial by independent judges and protection against violators of established expectations, property and contracts. Thus public discussion of policy and general agreement as to the conditions under which ordinary life was carried on, became fundamental habits, even before what we call democracy was possible.

A little more than a century ago, most

men lived with their fellows, eating and sleeping and trading, under the control of kings and their agents. No king could do exactly what he liked with other folk; but some kings were more closely controlled than others by groups of landowners and traders, assembled in what we now call Parliaments, Congresses or Chambers of Representatives. The king's authority, however, seemed to the majority to be in some sense "divine": and the king's person had some of the magical quality of the early medicine-man or priest. But new ideas had disturbed the Christianity of the Middle Ages; and in the sixteenth century in North-western Europe and later America, religion had come to be organized by small independent groups of equals for themselves. This Protestantism in religion taught men the possibility of a sort of Protestantism in politics, which is democracy. Also the kings of the Reformation period had assisted in destroying the prestige of the clergy in religion, and thus undermined their own authority; for if a man could get what he wanted of religion