

# THE COMMONWEAL

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## NOTES ON PASSING EVENTS.

THE kind of news which we have lately received from Chicago could be a surprise to no one who has watched the course of events in America even through the medium of the bourgeois papers. On the one hand the vast number of men out of work, "at least a million," says the *Daily News*; on the other the struggle of the Knights of Labour for the eight hours' day (elsewhere told of in this number of the *Commonweal*) which means really the claim for a rise of wages: on the one hand dislocation of the labour-market and want of "employment," on the other claims for a greater share of the waning profits of the "employers." Such a condition of things is just the one to bring about collision between two parties obviously irreconcilable—the employers, brutal, domineering, short-sighted, seeing nothing but immediate gain or loss of money; the employed, no sheep to be shorn with pleasure and thanks for the removal of a burden. The lightning was bound to flash from two such dark clouds as this drawing near to each other.

As for the immediate events, the fight of May 4th, was one of those pieces of bloodshed which are the natural results of driving oppressed men into a corner: it must have been clear to those taking part in the meeting that the police would take the first opportunity for attacking them, and that even their dispersal would scarcely have saved them from a volley of shot. Men assembled in a great mass under such conditions are not likely to imitate the sham chivalry of the eighteenth century drilled hirelings, and request their enemy to fire first: it was a fight between people prepared to fight.

Meantime, we may note what was the nature of the speech of Samuel Fielden as told of in our bourgeois press, and the report of which brought out the "body of 400 police armed with staves and muskets . . . in extended platoon, which occupied the entire width of the street from house to house." It was just such a speech as is made by any of our speakers at street corners in London on Sundays. It was to guard against dispersal and arrest at the least, and probably also against immediate musket-shot that the revolutionists came armed on this occasion. They were driven into a corner, and they fought, as men of mettle are apt to do when in such a plight.

In short, it seems clear that the dominant class was determined in its fear of revolutionary action, to put down revolutionary opinion with a high hand; nor can it be denied that the Tuesday's fight has given them a good occasion to do so, and they are probably rejoicing even amidst their terror at the outbreak, because of its affording them their opportunity, whether they deliberately provoked it or not. A white terror is certainly setting in, which is likely to be specially ferocious, since in America the tyranny of middle-class democracy is not hampered by any of the sentiment which, half real and half hypocritical, still clings to it in England—till the middle-class shall become quite awakened by fear.

The American press is even suggesting the repression of immigration as a remedy for the spread of Socialism. If they are really in earnest, and succeed in carrying out such a measure, the great uprising will not be long delayed. That such a thing should be even spoken of, shows how swift has been the advance of Socialism. Once the two great Commercial Democratic Countries of the world prided themselves on being an asylum for political refugees: that was in the days when the refugees seemed no danger to commercial tyranny; which, therefore, was not sorry to hold in its bosom a half-hidden threat, for which it was not responsible, against absolutism, its own special enemy. Now, on the contrary, any spurt of fear sufficiently felt may at any time arouse the White Terror, either in England or America; nor will either Democracy, and, as aforesaid, especially the latter, be a whit behind the old Absolutisms in vigour of repression when it is really touched by fear.

The thoughtful middle-class man—the master—sees two prospects before him—the first baleful, the second fortunate. The first is the practical break up of the system which makes him master, and his place void in a society in which the rich and the poor have alike melted into equality. He sees himself no longer what he was—the stern director of healthy compulsion, or the condescending distributor of unpauperising rewards—but a man like other men, working for his

own livelihood, winning his own pleasures, all chance of his keeping a thousand men poor for his pleasure denied to him. This is a dreadful prospect to him; therefore, looking round on the power which he and those like him wield, he comforts himself with another possible prospect. He sees his class, wise in time, suppressing all opinion determinedly, though as slyly as possible; he sees part of the working-classes bribed into being his supporters, and the rest, the true have-nots, rigidly kept down. The old tyranny of the Roman empire is the model of his ideal: the jarring of families and tribes over now; the slaves reduced to sullen silence; the people kept quiet with bread and dog-fights; the rich free—free each man to hunt out his pleasure amidst the form of corruption which best suits his own sordid soul. This is the ideal of our masters of to-day, expressed with more or less hypocrisy, more or less timidity, but always returned to as a solid comfort amidst the fears engendered by the obvious decay of their system.

Well, these two prospects are visible to us as well as to the masters; but there is another which they do not seem to see, though it is more likely to be realised than either of the others. It involves, however, the partial realisation of their ideal. This second *Pax Romana* (peace of the empire) brought about, no corner of the civilised world in which a man can openly proclaim the wrongs of the have-nots; any spoken word which may break the peace of corruption, a crime, a wickedness; for the proletariat the civilised world one vast prison, in short, and no escape from it save death; and then—the upheaval. Since nothing but death will deliver us, there will be men who will choose a death which may bring about at least something. The word which may not be spoken will be whispered, and the whisper will be a gathering sign.

It is the course which will bring about this that the American middle-classes seem to be taking. Already the air is stifling with the sense of repression, and heavy with boasts of the violence of the well-to-do, who see success before them, especially since they hope to detach the mass of their own workmen from the revolutionary camp. And they probably will succeed in this at least, in showing the starved-out proletarians of Europe that they no longer have a city of refuge in America, but will meet there exactly the same oppression which they are used to in Europe. Once more, it is impossible that this should not hasten the coming Revolution all over the world.

Nor it must be said are the ruling classes quite ignorant of the fact that they will at least have rough times to pass through before they can attain to the peace of perpetual universal slavery, the hope of which they so vainly hug. It is a sign of the times that the *Tory Standard* should have an article on the Chicago riots which fairly admits, as it does, the facts of the genuine evolution of Socialism, and which sees that the outbreak is no mere accident to a peculiar form of our present system, but a consequence of the spread of enlightenment, and the results of steady propaganda. In the face of such admissions we need not combat the usual fallacies which the same article puts forward, since although the writer says, "That in the long run the forces of order will prevail in America and in Europe, we do not for a moment doubt;" it is clear from the rest of his article that he does very much doubt it.

Grand Court ceremonies have varied the budget of terrible and doubtful news to hand during the last few days; the same morning which gave the papers the happy chance of describing the hard won police victory at Chicago, gave them the opportunity of a long account of the glories of the costumes of the Drawing Room. In other words, the loads of idiocy with which the Court ladies try to set off their somewhat doubtful charms. One almost wonders that even such empty fools as these are, are not ashamed to play such a farce in the midst of all these tragedies.

Or that farce of all farces, the Queen opening the Colonial Exhibition with a Court ceremonial, crowned by the degradation of a man of genius! It fairly sickens one to think that the man who wrote "Rispa," with all its passion and deep sympathy for the wrongs of the poor, should have been driven by mere yielding to convention, to allow such flunkey doggerel as this Jingo "Ode" to appear with his name tacked on to it. That the Press, including the *Pall Mall*, should puff it is proper and natural, of course; they know that this Exhibition is just a piece of commercial advertisement (who gets the money realised by it, by the way?) and with their tongues in their cheeks proceed to

praise the exemplification it offers of the hopes of the perpetual unity of the empire; and even poor Home Rule must be juggled in to point the moral.

Examples of the last remains of the art of India which our commercialism has destroyed, have been made to do duty as a kind of gilding for the sordidness of the rest of the show, and are a sorry sight indeed to one who knows anything of what the art of the East has been. But let that pass. There are, perhaps, certain exhibits of examples of the glory of the Empire which have been, I think, forgotten. We might begin at the entrance with two pyramids, *à la Timour*, of the skulls of Zulus, Arabs, Burmese, New Zealanders, etc., etc., slain in wicked resistance to the benevolence of British commerce. A specimen of the wire whips used for softening the minds of rebellious Jamaica negroes under the paternal sway of Governor Eyre might be shown, together with a selection of other such historical mementoes, from the blankets infected with small-pox sent to unfriendly tribes of Red-Skins in the latter eighteenth century down to the rope with which Louis Riel was hanged last year, for resisting a particularly gross form of land-stealing. The daily rations of an Indigo ryot and of his master under one glass case, with a certificate of the amount of nourishment in each, furnished by Professor Huxley. The glory of the British arms gained in various successful battles against barbarians and savages, the same enclosed in the right eye of a louse. The mercy of Colonists towards native populations; a strong magnifying-glass to see the same by. An allegorical picture of the emigrant's hope (a) on leaving England; (b), after six months in the Colonies. A pair of crimson plush breeches with my Lord Tennyson's "Ode" on the opening of the Exhibition, embroidered in gold, on the seat thereof. A great many other exhibits of a similar nature could be found suitable to the exposition of the Honour, Glory, and Usefulness of the British Empire.

Rebellion, it seems, will soon be the fashion. Lord Wolseley disdains to deny the apparently preposterous brag of the Orange Chieftain; so it may be supposed there is at least some truth in it. We Socialists are not, of course, going to cry horror on rebellion; but the complacency with which the idea is received forms a curious comment on the outcry made by respectable people against other forms of rebellion. Bourgeois moralists will discover that everything is fair and even beautiful in defence of the sacred rights of property, when they are once seriously attacked.

WILLIAM MORRIS.

## THE COMMERCIAL HEARTH.

(Concluded from page 42.)

We defy any human being to point to a single reality, good or bad, in the composition of the Bourgeois family. It is indubitably the most perfect specimen of the complete sham that history has presented to the world. There are no holes in the texture through which reality might chance to peer. The Bourgeois hearth dreads honesty as its cat dreads cold water. The literary classics that are reprinted for its behoof it demands shall be vigorously Bowdlerised, even though at the expense of their point. Topics of social importance are tabooed from rational discussion, with the inevitable result that erotic instances of middle-class womanhood are glad of the excuse afforded by "good intentions," "honest fanaticism," and the like things supposed to be associated with "Contagious Diseases Act" and "Criminal Law amendment" agitations, to surfeit themselves on obscenity. And these are the people who cannot allow unexpurgated editions of Boccaccio or even of Sterne or Fielding to be seen on their drawing-room tables! Then again, the attitude of the family to the word—"damn." Now if there is an honest straightforward word in the English language—a word which the Briton utters in the fulness of his heart—it is this word; and precisely, as it would seem, for this reason it is a word which is supposed never to enter the "family," even newspapers, in order to maintain their right of entrance to the domestic sanctuary, having to print it with a "d" and a dash—the meaning of which euphemism, by a polite fiction, the "wife" or "daughter" is supposed not to understand. But the word is coarse and offensive in itself, the Bourgeois may retort. You have tried to make it so, I reply, by classing it with the filthy and inane phrases, bred of the squalor which modern capitalism creates, but in reality it is good, expressive English. Nay, more, it has "higher claims on your consideration"—to employ one of your own phrases—it bears the impress of Christianity upon it; for is it not to Christianity that we are indebted for the ennobling idea and spiritual significance of the word? The reputed founder of Christianity, if the authenticity of the gospels is to be relied on in this respect, much affected the expression. In fact, in common consistency you ought to reduce the "damns" of your New Testaments to "d—s," to make the work suitable for family reading. You do not do this, and why? Because your real objection to the colloquial "damn" is, as before remarked, that it has a ring of honest sentiment in it against which your sham family sentiment revolts.

Let us take another "fraud" of middle-class family life—the family party. That ever and anon a wide circle of friends should meet together in a spirit of good-fellowship is clearly right and rational; but the principle of the family party is that a body of persons often having nothing whatever in common but ties of kinship extending in remoteness from the definiteness of blood relation to the indefiniteness of connection—that such a motley crew should thus meet together in exclusive conclave, and spend several mortal hours in simulated interest

in each other. Now a cousin, let us say, may be an interesting person, but very often he is not. If he is not, why, in the name of average human understanding, should one be expected every 25th of December or other occasion, to make a point of spending one's leisure with a man who is a cousin but not interesting rather than with another man who is interesting but not a cousin? The reason is, of course, that the tradition of the "family" has to be kept up. A "relation," however remote, is, in the eyes of Bourgeois society, more to a man than a friend, however near. So relations, male and female, congregate together on certain occasions to do dreary homage to this "family" sentiment.

On the same principle the symbolical black of mourning is graduated by the tailor and milliner in mathematically accurate ratio, according to the amount, not of affection, but of relationship. The utter and ghastly rottenness of Bourgeois family sentiment is in nothing more clearly evinced than in the mockery of grief and empty ostentation of tailoring and millinery displayed on the death of a near relation. What is the first concern of the middle-class household the instant the life-breath has left one of its members but to "see after the mourning," as the expression is? Now to a person of sensibility, the notion that the moment he enters on his last sleep his or her relations will "see about the mourning" may well impart to death a terror which it had not before, and thus act as an incentive to carefully-concealed suicide. We believe, indeed, the frequency of "mysterious disappearances" in middle-class circles may be largely explained by this, without resorting to far-fetched hypotheses of midnight murders on the Thames embankment, and the like. No, to signify a bereavement to the outer world (if so desired) by a band of crape on the sleeve or hat, or some such simple emblem, is one thing; to eagerly take advantage of the bereavement for the purpose of decking out the person in trousers designed in the newest cut adapted for the display of the male leg, or "bodies" in which the fulness of the female breast is manifested, is quite another—and nothing less than a ghastly travesty of sentiment.

This, then, is the "hearth," this the family life, the family sentiment which certain writers are so jealous of preserving. In vain do enthusiastic young persons band themselves together, under the benediction of the old man of Coniston, into societies of St George, in the hope that the low level of modern social life, with its vulgarity, its inanity, and its ugliness, by some wondrous educational stimulus, emanating from their own enthusiastic and artistic souls, may undergo a process of upheaval. After some years of Ruskinian preaching, what is the net result? A sprinkling of households among specially literary and artistic circles where better things are attempted, and so far as the elements of furniture and decoration are concerned, perhaps with some measure of success. But even here you generally find the counterbalancing evil inevitably attending a hothouse culture out of harmony with general social conditions—viz., affectation and self-consciousness. No healthy living art or culture has ever been the result of conscious effort. When it comes to saying "go to, now, let us be wise," or "let us be artistic," it is quite certain that the wisdom or art resulting will not be worth very much. The distinction between an artificial culture of this sort, which is cut off from the life of the society as a whole, and the natural culture which grows out of such life, is as the difference between the flower plucked from its root and withering in the hand and the same flower growing in luxuriance on its native soil. For what, after all, has modern art to offer but at best the plucked flowers of the art of the past, which sprang out of the life of the past? Your societies of St George, your aesthetic movements, etc., only touch a fringe of the well-to-do classes: they have no root in the life of the present day; and because they have no root they wither away, and in a few years remain dried up between the pages of history, to mark the place of mistaken enthusiasm and abortive energies. It is surely time that these excellent young people, together with their beloved prophet, descended for a while from their mount of Ruskinian transfiguration, with its rolling masses of vaporous sentiment, to the prosaic ground of economic science, and saw things as they are.<sup>1</sup> They would then recognise the vanity of their efforts, and the reason of this vanity to lie in their disregard of the economic foundation and substructure of all human affairs; they would see the radical impossibility of the growth of any art, culture, or sentiment in the slimy ooze of greed and profit-mongering—in other words, in a society resting on a capitalistic basis. They would see, further, that the end of the world of profit and privilege cannot be attained by enthusiasms, good intentions, or any available form of class culture, but will have to be reached by a very different route—maybe through February riotings, and possibly still rougher things.

The transformation of the current family-form—founded as it is on the economic dependence of women, the maintenance of the young and the aged falling on individuals rather than on the community—into a freer, more real, and therefore a higher form, must inevitably follow the economic revolution which will place the means of production and distribution under the control of all for the good of all. The Bourgeois "hearth," with its jerry-built architecture, its cheap art its shoddy furniture, its false sentiment, its pretentious pseudo-culture will then be as dead as Roman Britain.

E. BELFORT BAX.

<sup>1</sup> [I think that whatever damage Ruskin may have done to his influence by his strange bursts of fantastic perversity, he has shown much insight even into economical matters, and I am sure he has made many Socialists; his feeling against Commercialism is absolutely genuine, and his expression of it most valuable.—W. M.]

The slavery of the poor to the rich is based upon, maintained and perpetuated by force.