

SOCIALISM FROM THE ROOT UP.

CHAPTER III.—THE BREAK-UP OF FEUDALISM.

THE period of change from the feudal system into that of commerce is so important, and so significant to our subject, that it demands a separate chapter.

The beginning of the sixteenth century found, as we have said, the craft-gilds corrupted into privileged bodies holding within them two orders of workmen—the privileged and the unprivileged—the two forming the germ of a society founded on capital and wage-labour. The privileged workmen became middle-class; the unprivileged, proletarians.

But apart from the gilds, the two classes were being created by the development of commerce, which needed them both as instruments for her progress. Mediæval commerce knew nothing of capitalistic exchange; the demands of local markets were supplied by the direct exchange of the superfluity of the produce of the various districts and countries. All this was now being changed, and a world-market was being formed, into which all commodities had to pass; and a huckstering class grew up for the carrying on of this new commerce, and soon attained to power, amidst the rapid break-up of the old hierarchical society with its duly ordered grades.

The fall of Constantinople, which was followed in thirty years by the discovery of America, was a token of this great change. The Mediterranean was no longer the great commercial sea, with nothing beyond it but a few outlying stations. The towns of Central Europe—*e.g.*, Augsburg, Nuremberg, Bruges, and the Hanse towns—were now sharing the market with Venice and Genoa, the children of Constantinople: there was no longer one great commanding city in Europe. But it was not only the rise in the commercial towns that was overturning feudal society. As they conquered their enemy, the feudal nobles, they fell into the clutches of bureaucratic monarchs, who either seized on them for their own possessions, or used them as tools for their projects of conquest and centralisation. Charles V., *e.g.*, played this game through South Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands, and with Venice, under cover of the so-called "Holy Roman Empire," while at the same time he had fallen into possession of Spain by marriage; and disregarding his sham feudal empire, he bent all his efforts into turning these countries into a real bureaucratic State. In France the last liberties of the towns were crushed out. In England the plunder of the religious houses enabled Henry VIII. to found a new nobility, subservient to his own absolutism, in place of the ancient feudal nobility destroyed by their late civil war.

Everywhere the modern political bureaucratic *nation* was being developed. In France the long and fierce wars of the Burgundian and Armagnac factions gave opportunity for the consolidation of the monarchy, which was at last effected by Louis XI., the forerunner of the most successful king of France and the last successful one—Louis XIV. In England the Wars of the Roses were not so bitter as the French wars, and the people took small part in them, except as vassals or the households of the contending nobles; but they nevertheless played their part in the disruption of feudality, not only by the thinning-out of the nobles slain in battle or on the scaffold, but also by helping directly to draw England into the world-market.

Under the mediæval system the workmen, protected and oppressed by the lords of the manor and the gilds, were not available for the needs of commerce. The serfs ate up the part of the produce spared them by their lords; the gild craftsmen sold the produce of their own hands to their neighbours without the help of a middle-man. In neither case was there anything left over for the supply of a great market.

But England, one of the best pasture countries of the world, had in her even then capacities for profit-grinding, if the tillage system of the manor and the yeoman's holdings could be got rid of. The landowners, ruined by their long war, saw the demand for English wool, and set themselves to the task of helping evolution with much of the vigour and unscrupulous pettifogging which has since won for their race the temporary command of the world-market. The tenants were rack-rented, the yeomen were expropriated, the labourers driven off the land into the towns, there to work as "free" labourers, and England thus contributed her share to commerce, paying for it with nothing more important than the loss of the rough joviality, plenty, and independence of spirit, which once attracted the admiration of foreigners more crushed by the feudal system and their abuses than the English were.

Thus all over Europe commercialism was rising. New needs were being discovered by men who were gaining fresh mastery over nature, and were set free from old restraints to struggle for individual pre-eminence. A fresh intelligence and mental energy was shedding its light over the more sordid side of the period of change. The study of the Greek literature at first hand was aiding this new intelligence among cultivated men, and also, since they did but half understand its spirit, was warping their minds into fresh error. Art was no longer religious and simple—the harmonious expression of the thought of the people—but was growing more and more ambitiously individualistic and arrogant, and at the same time grew more and more retrospective and tainted with pedantry.

Amidst all this it is clear that the old religion would no longer serve the new spirit of the times. The Mediæval Church, the kingdom of heaven on earth, in full sympathy with the temporal hierarchy, in which also every one had his divinely appointed place, and which restricted commerce and forbade usury, such a Church was no religion for the new commercialism; its religion must have nothing to do with the business of this world; so the individualist ethics of Early Chris-

tianity, which had been kept in the background during the period of the Mediæval Church, were once more brought to the front and took the place of the corporate ethics of that Church, of which each one of the "faithful" was but a part. Whatever base uses their enthusiasm was put to by cooler heads, this revived Christianity took a real hold on most of the progressive minds of the period, especially in the north; so that Protestantism became the real religion of the epoch, and even permeated Catholicism and gave it whatever true vitality it had; for its political part was an unreal survival from the Mediæval Church, and whatever of it was of any force became the mere ally of bureaucracy; a word which applies to the Protestant Churches just as much as the Catholic; and, in fact, everywhere the new religion became the useful servant of Commercialism, first by providing a new army of officials always subservient to the authority of government, and secondly by holding out to the people hopes outside their wretched life on earth, so as to quiet their discontent by turning their earthly aspirations heavenward. On the one hand like Early Christianity, it bade let the world alone to compete for the possession of privilege, and bade the poor pay no heed to the passing oppression of the day, which could not deprive them of their true reward in another world; but unlike Early Christianity, on the other hand it shared in the possession of privilege, and actively helped in the oppression which it counselled the oppressed not to rebel against. But, as a truly distinct and equal power beside the State, the Church was extinct; it was a mere salaried adjunct of the State. The story, moreover, of the robbery by private persons of the public property which the Mediæval Church once held, was a disgraceful one everywhere, but nowhere so disgraceful as in England.

But while modern Europe was developing for itself a new economy, a new religion, and a new patriotism, the change did not take place without a protest of the disappointed hopes of the people in the form of fresh rebellion; though it was little heeded amidst the furious wars for the place and power of kings, and the establishment of political boundaries of the newly made "nations." The Peasant War in Germany, and the revolt of the Anabaptists, are, so to say, the funeral torches of the Middle Ages. The first was much of the nature of other mediæval insurrections, except that it was fiercer and longer lived; it ends the series of outbreaks which had been so common in England during the first years of the century. The revolt of the Anabaptists was an attempt to realise the kingdom of God upon earth literally and simply in a Communistic Society based on supernaturalism, and was a protest of ignorant and oppressed men against the hardening of Christianity into bourgeois Protestantism, and of the hardening of feudal oppression into commercial exploitation.

Thus, then, was the feudal system broken down, to give place to a new world, whose government, under cover of carrying on the old monarchies and varied classes of feudality, was employed in one business only, the consolidation and continuance of the absolute property of the individual. It is true that in carrying out this function, the new society used the forms of the old, and asserted hereditary rights stiffly enough; but this was only in its transition from the old to the new. In truth the spirit of the Middle Ages was dead, and its theory of society and authority in Church and State was gone. The kingdom of heaven of the Mediæval Church had left the earth, and did not concern itself with its doings except so far as they constituted theological holiness or sins. God no longer owned the land allowing human beings to use it after a divinely ordained scheme. It was now the *property* of the absolute monarch, who might give it to whomsoever he would; and it was only for a brief space that a dim shadow of feudal responsibility clung to the landowner.

Serfdom was gone, and the gilds were now but close corporations of privileged workmen, or of employers of labour. The ordinary workman was now "free." That is to say he could work where and how he pleased, *if* he could find some one who would set him to work at the price of taking from him a part of the produce of his labour; which labour was now a commodity to be bought and sold in the market as the body of the chattel-slave once had been.

Of the working of this new form of privilege and slavery we shall see more in our next chapter.

E. BELFORD BAX AND WILLIAM MORRIS.

(To be continued.)

OBJECTIONS TO SOCIALISM.

(A Reply to Mr. Charles Bradlaugh, M.P.)

IV.

WE now pass to a paragraph whose careful reading and re-reading many times almost leads to the conclusion that to our objector Socialism is only concerned with a change in the method of distribution of goods, and not with the more important change in the method of their production. It is true that in the succeeding paragraphs there is some slight reference to this last; but it is of the very slightest, and is only made indirectly, in dealing with the attacks on "property." The fact is, that in this pamphlet, as in the St James's Hall debate, the primary question of Socialism and of our present-day society is never approached, and that primary question is the way in which our goods are produced, the unpaid labour expended in their production, the surplus-value resulting from this, and the source of all capital in that surplus-value.

However, though we regret that our main point is thus unchallenged and ignored, let us take what we have and deal with it. "Socialists