

# THE COMMONWEAL

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## POLITICAL NOTES.

THE past few days have brought about a change in the political atmosphere, which may perhaps have startled some persons; but it is not difficult to explain. The Government placed between the devil and the deep sea, have been screwing up their hearts for a Coercion Bill. This seems at first sight a simple and natural proceeding for a Tory Government, a thing which everybody would expect from them. But to pass an effective measure of coercion against such a solid opposition as the Irish nation offer to it, and to carry it out when passed, is an adventure which needs the courage of the past ages or of the future—the aristocratic period or the revolutionary one. The age of political farce in which we are now living in England cannot deal consciously with tragedy, though the actors in it can sit and watch many a farce-born tragedy go on before their eyes calmly enough. In fact, the Government swaggers coercion boldly enough but doesn't mean it; all the more as it has no shadow of a Strafford to carry out the policy of "thorough."

Meantime, the "Liberal Unionists" are preparing for a "new departure." Mr. Trevelyan has practically declared himself reconverted to Gladstonian policy, and the greater portion of his party will follow him, since the course of events of late has convinced them the cat is going to jump in the Home Rule direction. Some of the most sanguine of the Liberal prophets are even speculating on the return of Lord Hartington, and have already discounted that of Mr. Chamberlain, whose position, if he does return, would be a rather curious one for a sensitive man, until the lapse of time—say three weeks—shall have reinstated him in his old position of an infallible leader of the democratic party.

The Tory Government then are beaten, and the only question is how they will take their beating, whether they will on the one hand judiciously determine to do nothing, in which case they may yet have a longish lease of life before them, as it is a matter of course that the Liberal party "united" or disunited can have no wish to come in again yet awhile, to accept the responsibility of making peace with the Irish by passing a compromise Home Rule Bill—a somewhat delicate operation.

Or possibly they will ride for a fall by bringing in a fierce Coercion Bill without any hope of passing it, and back this by the promise of a Land Bill to follow it, which the report of the Commission gives them an opportunity of doing. This would give them the chance of appealing to the country with law-and-order in one hand and "remedy" (of the well used delusive kind) in the other; and it is not all so sure, in spite of the Liberal rejoicings now on hand, that they would be beaten in a general election. Yet if they (the Tories) win, what next? And how would they deal with a still unpacified Ireland? And what would their Land Bill amount to? These are questions which they will have to answer if they succeed, although they will certainly forget them deliberately till the moment for answering them comes.

Nor if the United Liberal Party comes in again will its position be either an easy or a triumphant one. The Home Rule Bill must be a compromise, and as such will be accepted by the Irish only as a lever to bring about the full accomplishment of their aspirations. But even before the half measure of Home Rule is gained the underlying question of land and livelihood in Ireland will have to be faced; a question which involves that of the land and livelihood elsewhere. This fact does enlighten a little even the dastardly short-sightedness of Parliamentary politics, as may be noticed in Lord Salisbury's last speech, in which he had the impudence to impugn the patriotism of the Irish, because they have found out that they cannot separate the cause of self-government from that of the livelihood of the people.

Though perhaps he really was saying what he thought on this occasion; for naturally to a Tory the mere *superstition* of nationality is a more important matter than the *reality* of the necessity of dealing with the sufferings of an industrious and honest population.

This necessity will be the Nemesis that will presently overtake not only the Tories and the Whigs but the Liberals and Radicals also; unless those last named will face the real difficulty. When Home Rule has been gained and the party question has been laid, we shall then see if the sympathy now so widely expressed for the cottars of Glen-

beigh and elsewhere in Ireland was genuine or not. If it is not extended to the dwellers in the Wiltshire village and the London slum, and if the same kind of remedies are not proposed for these latter as for the Irish cottars, it will be proved to have been a mere piece of party clap-trap got up for the occasion. We need not fear but that the occasion will be afforded for such practical sympathy: the Irish question will help to sow the seed of revolution throughout the British islands.

To be sure if the Whigs, Tories and Liberals had any foresight or any courage they would have united to stamp it out this time as they have done before. The Unionist Liberals *were* wise in their generation when they turned on Gladstone; they are now in coming under his wing again going to exhibit themselves as fools and cowards as well as reactionists.

Happily it always happens so in revolutions; the nearer the time comes for the defeat of reaction, the more pressing its necessities grow, the more the courage of the reactionists fails them, because they begin to be conscious that their cause has become a mere mass of found-out lies and helpless hypocrisies.

W. M.

## WHY WE CELEBRATE THE COMMUNE OF PARIS.

THE "moons and the days" have brought us round again to the anniversary of the greatest tragedy of modern times, the Commune of Paris of 1871, and with it the recurring duty for all Socialists of celebrating it both enthusiastically and intelligently. By this time the blatant slanders with which the temporarily unsuccessful cause was assailed when the event was yet fresh in men's minds have sunk into the dull gulf of lies, hypocritical concealments, and false deductions, which is called bourgeois history, or have become a dim but deeply rooted superstition in the minds of those who have information enough to have heard of the Commune, and ignorance enough to accept the bourgeois legend of it as history.

Once more it is our duty to raise the whole story out of this poisonous gloom and bring it to the light of day, so that on the one hand those who are not yet touched by Socialism may learn that there was a principle which animated those who defended revolutionary Paris against the mingled dregs of the woeful period of the Second Empire, and that that principle is still alive to-day in the hearts of many thousands of workers throughout civilisation, and year by year and day by day is growing in strength and in the hold it has of the disinherited masses of our false society; and on the other hand that we Socialists may soberly note what went on in this story, and may take both warning and encouragement from its events. I have heard it said, and by good Socialists too, that it is a mistake to commemorate a defeat; but it seems to me that this means looking not at this event only, but at all history in too narrow a way. The Commune of Paris is but one link in the struggle which has gone on through all history of the oppressed against the oppressors; and without all the defeats of past times we should now have no hope of the final victory. Neither are we yet sufficiently removed in time from the events to judge how far it was even possible to avoid the open conflict at the time, or to appreciate the question as to what would have become of the revolutionary cause if Paris had tamely yielded itself up to the perfidy of Thiers and his allies. One thing, on the other hand, we are sure of, that this great tragedy has definitely and irrevocably elevated the cause of Socialism to all those who are prepared to look on the cause seriously, and refuse to admit the possibility of ultimate defeat. For I say solemnly and deliberately that if it happens to those of us now living to take part in such another tragedy it will be rather well for them than ill for them. Truly it is harder to live for a cause than to die for it, and it injures a man's dignity and self-respect to be always making noisy professions of devotion to a cause before the field is stricken, on which he is to fight in the body. But with the chance of bodily sacrifice close a-head there come also times of trial which either raise a man to the due tragic pitch or cast him aside as a useless and empty vapourer. To use a transparent metaphor, on the march to the field of battle there are plenty of opportunities for the faint-hearted to fall out of the ranks, and many will do so whose courage and devotion were neither doubted by others nor by themselves while the day of actual battle was far distant. So such times of trial are good because they are times of trial; and we may well think that few indeed of those

who fell sixteen years ago, who exposed themselves to death and wounds at all adventures; were mere accidental braggarts caught in the trap. Of those whose names are well known this was far from being the case, and who can doubt that the nameless multitude who died so heroically had sacrificed day by day other things than life, before it came to that?

Furthermore, it must surely be rather more than doubtful to all thoughtful men if the mere exercise of every-day and civil virtues, even when directed towards the social end, will suffice to draw the world out of its present misery and confusion. Consider the enormous mass of people so degraded by their circumstances that they can scarcely understand any hope for their redemption that can be put before them in peaceful and constitutional times. Yet these are the very people for whom we are working; and are they to have no hand in the work, then? is it to be once more according to the degrading Positivist motto, "everything for you, nothing by you?" Meanwhile in these people, unless we Socialists are all wrong, there are seeds of manly and social feeling, capable of large development; and surely when the time comes that their hope will be made manifest, as it was in the time of the Commune, and will lie before them for their hands to take, they will then have part in the work indeed, and by the act of doing so will at once raise themselves out of the slough of degradation into which our false society has cast them and in which it keeps them. The revolution itself will raise those for whom the revolution must be made. Their newborn hope translated into action will develop their human and social qualities, and the struggle itself will fit them to receive the benefits of the new life which revolution will make possible for them. It is for boldly seizing the opportunity offered for thus elevating the mass of the workers into heroism that we now celebrate the men of the Commune of Paris. True they failed in conquering immediate material freedom for the people, but they quickened and strengthened the ideas of freedom by their courageous action and made our hope of to-day possible; and if to-day any one doubts that they were fighting for the emancipation of labour, their enemies at the time had no doubt about the matter. They saw in them no mere political opponents, but "enemies of society," people who could not live in the same world with them, because the basis of their ideas of life was different—to wit, humanity, not property. This was why the fall of the Commune was celebrated by such hecatombs sacrificed to the bourgeois god, Mammon; by such a riot of blood and cruelty on the part of the conquerors as quite literally has no parallel in modern times. And it is by that same token that we honour them as the foundation-stone of the new world that is to be.

WILLIAM MORRIS.

## CRIMINAL LAW UNDER SOCIALISM?

(Concluded from p. 82).

If we consider now the order of heinousness in the respective classes of crimes enumerated, we must admit that the first, those against property, since they spring directly from a rotten economic condition, must be regarded as (barring specially aggravating circumstances) the most entitled to consideration. It will be scarcely necessary, however, to controvert the absurd notion put forward by a certain section of Anarchists, that the mere individual appropriation of the property of other individuals, or in plain language theft (such as that practised by the Anarchist heroes, Stellmacher and Duval), has anything whatever to do with Socialism, and the expropriation it advocates. On the contrary, Socialism deprecates robbery in all its forms. The mere change of individual possession of property does not affect the matter in the least. One can very well exonerate the poor man who steals to satisfy his wants; but when a man who has merely satisfied a personal desire of his own at the expense of another person, seeks to cover this individual act with the mantle of principle, an element of hypocrisy enters into the case which tends considerably to exacerbate our opinion of him. Let him steal if he will, but not as an act of devotion to any cause. This, however, by the way. The fact remains that theft and its allied offences are the immediate result of current economic conditions. It is natural that men should seek to obtain the necessaries and comforts of life, legitimately if economic conditions allow them, if not, illegitimately.

The second class of offences named, those connected with sexual matters, from rape downwards, may be viewed from two or three different sides, and are complicated in ways which render the subject difficult of discussion in a journal—well, not exactly intended for "family reading," for to that level I trust the *Commonweal* will never sink—but for promiscuous circulation between the sexes. Here, as in the last case, viz., of theft or robbery, we must be careful in considering such offences, to eliminate the element of brutality or personal injury which may sometimes accompany them, from the offence itself. For the rest I confine myself to remarking that this class also, though not so obviously as the last, springs from an instinct legitimate in itself, but which has been suppressed or distorted. The opinions of most, even enlightened people, on such matters are, however, so largely coloured by the unconscious survival in their minds of sentiment derived from old theological and theosophical views of the universe, that they are not of much value. This is partly the reason, I take it, why the ordinary good-natured bourgeois who can complacently pass by on the other side, after casting a careless look on the most fiendish and organised cruelty in satisfaction of the economic craving—*gain*, is galvanised into a frenzy of indignation at some sporadic case of real or supposed ill-usage perpetrated in satisfaction of some *bizarre* form

of the animal craving—*lust*. Until people can be got to discuss this subject in the white light of physiological and pathological investigation, rather than the dim religious gloom of theosophical emotion, but little progress will be effected towards a due appreciation of the character of the offences referred to.<sup>1</sup>

The two last orders of crime named differ from the preceding, in that they do not have even a basis in natural or social instinct as such. A brutal assault or malicious injury (*i.e.*, one not inflicted in self-defence or under immediate and strong provocation) is purely and simply inhuman—criminal without having any direct palliation in the facts of economic conditions, like crimes against property, or in physiological and (possibly) economic conditions combined, like sexual crimes. Brutality and cruelty so far outweigh in enormity the two last as to seem almost to swallow them up. For instance, in cases of robbery or rape with violence, it is the personal violence accompanying the substantive crimes which naturally excites one's resentment most; and properly so, although it is the latter of which the bourgeois law primarily takes cognisance. Any crime causing bodily injury or suffering must surely, in the absence of specially palliative circumstances, be regarded as the most deserving of condemnation at the hands of society.

The same may be said of false accusation of crime, an offence which is now classed together with others much less serious, under the absurd name of Perjury, the idea being that its gravamen consists not in the injury done to the innocent but in its insult to the majesty of the law. The unperverted sense could scarcely conceive of any crime more monstrous than this,<sup>2</sup> and yet it is one which is frequently passed over lightly, with the view possibly of not discouraging prosecutions and thereby injuring the legal interest. By being classed under the head of perjury, moreover, it sounds less infamous than it really is, mere perjury being a thing recognised and practised in the best social circles, where the co-respondent in a divorce case who has been committing adultery swears he hasn't, as a mere matter of form.

It seems to us that all the serious offences with which any society would have to deal at present may be grouped under the classes named. Of course there are special orders of offences (such as bigamy) which belong essentially to it and to it alone, and with which we have not dealt. According to one view of the matter, crime may properly be defined as an action proscribed by law, and hence may or may not be immoral, since many of the most laudable actions have been, and are, proscribed by law. But in the foregoing I have confined myself to such crime as would be universally admitted to be directly anti-social—for, of course, it is with such only that the administration of a Socialist commonwealth could be concerned.

What has been said, we should mention, touches only the new society, conceived as having already passed through the transitional period of the revolutionary crisis, during which, the one aim of Socialism being the victory of the revolutionary principle, any means which would be conducive to that end would of necessity be adopted. For example, the death-penalty, the *systematic maintenance* of which as an institution is one of the most outwardly repulsive features of the criminal code of civilisation, would probably have to be held to, as the temporary measure of a revolutionary crisis.

And now a final word on the charge of sentimentalism commonly brought against those who object to the repression of crime by organised brutality. It is clear that the distinction between sentiment and sentimentalism in this connection (which has hitherto been conceived as one of degree merely) has been shifted progressively since the sense of horror at the infliction of pain first came prominently to the fore. What in the seventeenth century would have been complacently admitted as a necessity for the repression of crime would now be regarded with loathing (real or feigned) by the most determined supporter of "deterrent" punishments. The notion that there is any fixed point at which justifiable sentiment ends and sentimentalism begins is therefore plainly absurd. But that the distinction has a meaning I am not disposed to deny; although I do not believe it to consist in any question of degree. Sentimentalism is, as I take it, not excessive but *illogical sentiment*—that is, *unequally distributed sentiment*. Where there is a strong sensibility to the feelings of one class or body of persons and a comparative callousness to the feelings of other classes under like circumstances—there, I think, we have *sentimentalism*. And the tendency of the modern bourgeois treatment of crime is precisely in the direction of such sentimentalism.

In the Middle Ages "benefit of clergy" might be claimed by offenders who could read and write, such "benefit" consisting in exemption from the ordinary punishment for the offence. In the modern world all such wicked and unenlightened distinctions are abolished. The law nowadays makes no distinction of persons between men. True; but it makes distinctions between *men* and *women*; and where *law* draws no distinction, *practice* does. "Benefit of clergy" is superseded by "benefit of sex." Not only are all the more brutal features of "penal discipline" still practised on men abolished as regards women, but the

<sup>1</sup> It is a curious circumstance, as illustrating the change of men's view of offences, that an ordinary indecent assault which in the Middle Ages, in Chaucer's time for instance, would have been regarded as a species of rude joke, should now be deemed the most serious of crimes.

<sup>2</sup> The same applies to *chantage*, which is the attempt to make personal capital out of the knowledge of some misdeed of another, by threats of disclosure. If anything would justify the taking of life it is surely this; and one of the greatest artistic blunders Charles Dickens ever made was in the attempt to awaken sympathy in the reader for such a scoundrel as Tigg, when going to meet his well-deserved doom at the hands of his victim. That Jonas Chuzzlewit, who inflicted it, was a villain himself does not alter the matter so far as Tigg is concerned.