

THE COMMONWEALTH

The Official Journal of the Socialist League.

VOL. 4.—No. 107.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 28, 1888.

WEEKLY; ONE PENNY.

NOTES ON NEWS.

AFTER a three days' trial, a jury have found our friends Graham and Burns guilty of "unlawful assembly," and a judge has sentenced them to six weeks' imprisonment. As both of our friends are emphatically *men*, they will not expect a long Jeremiad from us over their fate specially, since so many people are sharing it; and they will no doubt take it as part of the day's work, and a natural reward for courage and conduct exercised on behalf of the people. The real interest in the event to them as to us is as to what is to come of all this, what was intended by the closing of Trafalgar Square and the police onslaught of the 13th of November. No one can doubt who looks on the matter fairly, whatever his political views may be, that the intention is the suppression of all meetings in the open-air that may seem inconvenient to the Government; and the Government, I may add, has now got an instrument in its hands which it can use whenever it pleases. The right of public meeting which our Radical friends fondly thought we possessed, turns out to have no existence; a practically irresponsible police officer can take upon himself to forbid any meeting, and can order the maiming or slaying of as many people as he pleases in the exercise of his *discretion*, if he chooses to disperse such a meeting.

This is Mr. Justice Charles's law, and certainly he is nobly earning his new promotion by laying it down so clearly, and by acting so frankly as the senior counsel for the prosecution, though this latter proceeding we are well used to by now. Let us have a sentence or two from his remarkable charge to the jury.

"He reminded them also, and he could not repeat it too strongly, that it matters not whether the purpose was lawful or unlawful . . . it did not matter a pin's head what the purpose was." "He had carefully considered Mr. Asquith's contention as to the right of public meeting in the Square, but he could find no evidence of the right on the part of the public to hold meetings in any thoroughfare . . . he could find no right to hold meetings in them [thoroughfares] for the discussion of any question at all, whether social, political or religious."

To us Socialists this is no news: we all remember the trial of our comrades Williams and Mainwaring at Clerkenwell in 1886, where similar doctrine was held, though nominally our comrades were tried for obstruction and not for "unlawful assembly"; we were then told that it was no use our bringing evidence to prove that there was no real obstruction, that the meeting itself was the offence although it gave no inconvenience to any single person. We knew well enough why our meetings were interfered with, but the press and our middle-class acquaintance rebuked us or jeered us for saying that it was because we were Socialists, and they kept saying that we could not be allowed to hold meetings which "inconvenienced the public," and that that was the only reason why the police interfered with us. The recent events prove beyond a doubt that we were right: if the Radical meeting called on Bloody Sunday had been merely a political one, even though it was connected with the Irish revolt, it would not have been interfered with: our Radical friends became on that occasion Socialists; and it must be said that the authorities are doing their best to keep them so.

In truth all discontented members of the lower orders are now looked on by the classes as Socialists, and there is reason in that too; since where else can they look save to Socialism for a remedy?

Mr. Justice Charles repeated the well-worn lie that the crowd in Trafalgar Square was largely composed of roughs; and said that there was no doubt that it was true: he must be a credulous person indeed if that is really his opinion. The fact was so notoriously the reverse of that, that we may be excused for pointing out to those who may still suppose that they will have any defence from law on such occasions, that if the police will stick to such an obvious lie as this and a judge will profess to credit it, it is clear that no meeting big or little can be safe from the charge of its being "largely composed of roughs."

Meetings in the open-air, therefore, are unlawful, and may be dispersed at the discretion of the police, whether they are social, political or religious. That is the law. The practice will certainly be that some unlawful assemblies will be winked at by the police. Tory or respectable Liberal meetings will not be meddled with, nor, as a rule,

will religious meetings; but Socialists will be put down whenever convenient as a matter of course, and Radical meetings also will often be harried when they are not consecrated to the cause of law and order by being called under the auspices of the Liberal leaders.

Thus at one stroke vanishes the dream of bringing about peaceably and constitutionally the freedom which we long for; (and we may hope not we only but many of our Radical friends also, although they have but a vague idea of what it means;) for if they do these things in the green tree what will they do in the dry? "Society" was a little alarmed, and much disgusted by the now regular unemployed agitation, and by that slight fear has been impelled to act in a way worthy of an ordinary absolutist government. Let the slight fear become a big one, the hand-writing on the wall grow clearer, and then we shall see suppression of indoor meetings also; suppression of associations, press prosecutions, and the like; and there is plenty of law for all that. What lies ahead of us is rougher work than languid "constitutional agitation"; passive resistance first, with the usual incidents of jail and fine and ruin, until our educational agitation has had its effect; then increase of reaction, increase of resistance; the occasion given by some special stupidity of reaction, not for one crisis but for several; apparent defeat maybe at first, but always as the seed of victory; till at last the reactionary brute force of the executive finds itself helpless even in the hour of its triumph. This is the vision which our enemies are forcing us to see by their present contemptible tyrannies, which seem so safe to them.

Meanwhile, Graham and Burn's sentence has turned all but the strongest stomachs for Coercion; the *Daily News*, the special Mr. Facing-both-ways of the party, calls for their immediate release. So we all do, but also for the immediate release of the victims of the drum-head court martial and of Edlin and Co., condemned on the evidence of the police who manufactured the riot and the tales against the "rioters," at once.

One word about the "gentlemen" who have been sent to prison. Their friends have been very busy trying to get them special indulgences in jail, naturally enough; but the result of this will be to make many middle-class people think that they are being treated worse than ordinary prisoners, since I now discover that it is only those who have a chance of being sent to prison who have any idea of what imprisonment means. Well, the fact is, as one of our comrades was saying to me the other day, that no "gentleman" would be treated as badly as any working-man. I add to this that when a "gentleman" comes out, unless his health has suffered, he is no worse than before; whereas a working-man is stamped by his imprisonment as a jail-bird whatever he has done. The subject of the prison system, however, is too wide a one to be treated in a mere note. Mr. Graham's spirited letter to the *Pall Mall* gives a hint of what lies at the bottom of it. Meantime, we say with our new contemporary, the *Star*, *Remember the unremembered!*

No doubt many Socialists were surprised that the jury did not find our friends guilty on all counts of the indictment; all that can be said about them was that they were commonplace. But the Edinburgh jury that acquitted our crofter friends were a very different set of men, and have recalled the best traditions of the days before '48, when the reactionists and democrats were at grips. All honour to them!

WILLIAM MORRIS.

THE ODD TRICK.

WE not unfrequently hear a certain school of sentimentalists sneer at Socialism as holding before men a merely low sensuous ideal of existence—of good living, etc., etc. We are accused by such of neglecting the higher ideals of Humanity for the affairs of the stomach and other still more despised organs. The usual and obvious retort to this sort of thing is the *ad hominem* one, that the persons who make the charge are themselves sufficiently well cared for in these lower matters to be able to afford to ignore them and turn their attention to things above. But though the gist of the matter is often contained in the above retort, it is as it stands, crude, unformulated, and impolite, even if it were always applicable, which it is not. Let us therefore for the nonce treat these people seriously and develop the answer to their objection in formulated fashion. For in truth this objection springs not merely