

THE COMMONWEAL

The Official Journal of the SOCIALIST LEAGUE.

VOL. 4.—No. 130.

SATURDAY, JULY 7, 1888.

WEEKLY; ONE PENNY.

NOTES ON NEWS.

THE Opposition having struck the "very wise and very bold" stroke we heard so much of last week, seems to have exhausted the arrows in its quiver, and no doubt hopes that the country will be satisfied with its last invention in the do-nothing business, and will wait henceforward for the bolt out of the blue which is to pulverise the Tories and raise the hopes of all those who may happen to be watching for the first time the going out of one party and the coming in of another. The hopes of those who have seen this process before will remain pretty much where they were.

Then there was what may almost be called a non-party debate and division on the Channel tunnel. The "person from another planet" would have supposed that the scheme would have been discussed on its own merits; that the subject-matter of debate would have been as to whether the tunnel was wanted; whether it could be safely made; how much it would cost, whether the expense of making it would be worth the advantage to be gained by it; and so on. The other-planeteer would have been disappointed; pretty much all that was talked of was whether or no the French would be able and willing to invade us by means of it. Here we are again under the horrors of war!

Anyhow it seems clear enough that a French or other hostile army who should be rash enough to trust itself to such a means of transit, would soon know as much of the horrors of war "as the man who invented them." The truth is that the whole pretence of fear of invasion through the tunnel is nothing but a pretence; it means opening up an opportunity to be used at some future time for pressing forward an increase of the army.

Lord Randolph Churchill was so candid as practically to admit this, and said that he voted against the scheme because if gone on with, it would give an occasion to a claim for more money for the army, which wouldn't suit him as he has taken a brief for economy just now. Which means in short that we must not consider whether the tunnel is possible or desirable, because if we do the jobbers will directly get their fork into us! O, British nation, wonder of the whole earth for your practicality and business-like habits, what a bragging, twaddling fool you be!

Government, determined to help its friends the publicans a little, has insisted on withdrawing its Sunday-closing clauses from the Local Government Bill. In spite of our friends the teetotallers, we must say that all this is a dismal and empty business. Really is it of so much importance whether a man determined to get drunk, performs that function on a Saturday or a Monday instead of a Sunday? After all, this is a clear case of a palliative that is useless and takes as long to get itself accepted as a condition of things which would not drive people to drunkenness as their only excitement, or as a mere drowning of their wretchedness for a little.

Mr. E. D. Lewis has had his answer at last from those two pillars of Law 'n'-Order, Mr. Justice Wills and Mr. Justice Nupkins—I ask pardon, Grantham—in the matter of Trafalgar Square, and the answer is just what might have been expected. Trafalgar Square was created by statute, and any right of meeting there must be similarly created. That is the gist of their answer. Of course if it had not been created by statute, common law would have forbidden meetings on it. Their lordships say that the right of public meeting is beyond discussion. On these terms it certainly is *at a public meeting*. You may meet in public whenever you please; *only* you mustn't meet here, nor there, nor at the other place. Where is the grievance? if you are starving and want to tell your rulers so, you had better buy a few acres of land: rents are going down in London now we believe.

The lamb going to law with the wolf is a curious spectacle to behold. The lamb must put up with it as long as he is a lamb. Perhaps evolution will change his wool into chain-mail and his feeble little shoulders

of mutton into arms and fists with a chopping-stick in them one of these days. But evolution is a long job, thinks Mr. Justice Nupkins.

At the annual meeting of "The National Association for the Promotion of State Colonisation," or, as we should call it, the Society for the Punishment of Poverty by Transportation (at which it appears that the working classes were represented by Mr. Maudsley, of the Salford Trades' Council), there was much rejoicing at the progress of the "work" (which, by the way, if it means anything, means that people are desperately hard up just now). A Parliamentary committee of 160 M.P.'s to help them (my word!); £10,000 granted by Government for getting rid from their own land of those inconvenient persons the Highland crofters, and all the rest of it. In short, these noble and gentle patriots, who love their native country so well that they want it all to themselves, were very happy, and their trades' union ally no less so.

A person not quite so happy, and whose share in her native country was but small, appeared before a magistrate next day with the following tale:—"To-day, at Dalston, a poor woman asked the assistance of Mr. R. W. Bros to get her son back from Canada. He and another lad, both about seventeen, had been sent out by the East-end Emigration Society on a pretence that they would have plenty of work. The magistrate: You had better go to Captain Hamilton, the secretary; but I should think there are many other lads who would be glad of the opportunity to get to Canada. Applicant: Yes, sir; if there was plenty of work, as they said; but my boy and his friend can neither get work nor food. The magistrate: I cannot give you anything. Go to Captain Hamilton." The worthy magistrate did *not* add "or hell," perhaps because he thought that the poor woman was there already, as certainly her unlucky son was. It is almost a pity that this woman did not apply to the chairman of the meeting held the day before.

It probably would have done little to check the flow of their spirits, though, which were exuberant, as may be gathered from the speech of Mr. Maudsley, the trades' unionist, who said: "The opposition proceeded chiefly from the Socialists, who knew that, if successful, the movement would cut the ground from under their feet." Now, as the Association disclaims the intention of sending out paupers or ne'er-do-wells, the movement must mean the transportation of thrifty and industrious workers. Anyone but a very stupid person, one would think, ought to be able to see that if *this* is an advantage to the country, the country must be in a bad way indeed, and sorely in need either of Socialists or of persons who have some better scheme than getting rid of its producers of wealth. In fact, what these people really want to do (and they would say so if they durst) is to get rid of all elements of discontent, that is to say, those whom they and their idleness have made poor and helpless. A Helot-hunt, again, they durst not recommend, but it is what would suit them best. If they could kill one-third of the working population, it would for a time "cut the ground from under the Socialists' feet—but not for long.

The only way, Mr. Maudsley, to get rid of discontent is to remove the cause of it. Transportation of units of discontent is like the flea's funeral—a hundred more come to it. The abolition of the monopoly in the means of production, the freeing of labour, which the Trades' Council are doing their best to prevent, is the only thing that will cut the ground away from the feet of the Socialists, because it will make true society possible, and so make an end of our name of combat.

That friend of the working-man, Mr. Blundell Maple, has been disporting himself before the Sweating Commission again, and after some further glorification of his firm, was "recalled" on his departure, and coming back said "that he had finished his evidence as to matters of fact, but there were other matters which he wished to go into." So he went into "these other matters," that were not matters of fact, at great length. Some of these are old friends of ours, which we must admit are to be classed as Mr. Maple classed them, if the report of his evidence, once more, is correct; such as, for example, that the working-men earn as much as ever they did, although the prices of

furniture have gone down; that their hours of labour are decreasing; that their skill as handicraftsmen is on the increase, owing probably to the fact that it is not needed as much as it was; and so on and so on. It is, however, a matter of fact that the number of the unemployed is increasing, and Mr. Maple's admission of it, if it could by any possibility be denied, may be considered the one grain of usefulness in the clammy jam of twaddle which this feeble committee allowed the workman's friend to shove down their throats. W. M.

THE REVOLT OF GHENT.

THE events of which an account is here given took place towards the close of the fourteenth century amongst a people of kindred blood to ourselves, dwelling not many hours' journey (as we travel now) from the place where we dwell; and yet to us are wonderful enough, if we think of them.

Few epochs of history, indeed, are more interesting than this defeated struggle to be free of the craftsmen of Flanders: whether we look upon the story as a mere story, a true tale, of the Middle Ages at their fullest development, rife with all the peculiarities of the period, exemplifying their manners and customs, the forms that their industry, their religion, their heroism took at the time; or whether we look upon it, as we Socialists cannot help doing, as a link in the great chain of the evolution of society, an incident, full of instruction, in the class-struggle which we have now recognised as the one living fact in the history of the world, since civilisation began, and which will only end when civilisation has been transformed into something else. Whether we look upon the Revolt of Ghent as a story of the past or as a part of our own lives and the battle which is not wasting, but using them, it is one of the great tales of the world.

One piece of good fortune also it has, that, as Horace says, it has not lacked a sacred poet. As the tale is here told, its incidents, often the very words of them, are taken from the writings of one of those men who make past times live before our eyes for ever. John Froissart, canon of Chimay in Hainault, was indeed but a hanger-on of the aristocracy; he was in such a position as would in our days have prevented him on principle from admitting any good qualities whatever in those people whom he was helping to oppress; but class-lying was not the fine art which it has since become; and the simpler habits of thought of Froissart's days gave people intense delight in the stories of deeds done, and developed in them what has been called epic impartiality: added to which, one domain for the cultivation of historical lies was not available in the Middle Ages, since, owing to the form feudal society had then taken, what we now call patriotism—i.e., national envy and rancour—did not exist. Englishman, Scotchman, Fleming, Spaniard, Frenchman, Gascon, Breton, are treated by John Froissart as men capable of valiancy, their deeds to be told of and listened to with little comment of blame or discrimination: and I think you will say before you have done with him that he could even see the good side of the revolutionary characters of his time, so long as they were not slack in noble deeds. The result of a low standard of morals, you will say. Maybe; and indeed I have noticed that a would-be high standard of morality is sometimes pretty fertile of lying, because it is so anxious that every event should square itself to an *a priori* theory. However that may be, there is the general epic impartiality of the mediæval chronicler amidst all his mistakes and misconceptions.

Now a word or two as to the political and social condition of Flanders in the fourteenth century, and then without more to do I will get to my story and introduce you to John Froissart, who has given me at least as much pleasure as he did to any one of the lords, ladies, knights, squires and sergeants who first heard him read.

First very briefly as to the political position of the country. Lying as it did between the growing monarchy or rather suzerainty of France and the disjointed members of the "Holy Roman" empire, it was with the former power that it had to deal. The rise of the great cities of Flanders and Hainault, and the power they could not fail to acquire, made the feudal lord of the country but a weak potentate, and he always had a tendency to lean on France for support. The French king on his part was ambitious of making the Earl of Flanders his vassal, and the help he gave him against his rebellious subjects had to be paid for by homage to the French Suzerainty, or at least by promises of homage. France therefore was distinctly the enemy of the Flemish people, though it was, when occasion served, the friend of the Flemish feudal lord. France also could strike a blow at the prosperity of the country without even putting an army in the field, by forbidding the export of wool, the great necessity to the woollen-weaving which was the main industry of Flanders, and this was done on several occasions.

Therefore it was natural for the leaders of the Flemish people to turn towards England as a support, both because there was a standing quarrel between the feudal lords of England and France, and because England was the wool-producing country of Europe. On the other hand, to an English king with a quarrel on hand with a French one, the advantage of the Flemish alliance was obvious enough; and accordingly at the beginning of the great feudal war between England and France we find our King Edward III. in firm alliance with James van Artevelde, the leader of the Flemish people, or rather bourgeoisie, treaties made between them as to the free passage of wool, and Queen Philippa godmother to the enfant chid of the great Bourgeois, while the Earl of Flanders was hanging about the French Court a disinherited lord.

Now as to the social condition of the Flemings. Manufacturing by handicraft pure and simple, without division of labour, was carried by them about as far as it could go, and the gild system was fully developed there, accompanied by a complete municipal system, democratic and social as far as matters within the association were concerned, though exclusive as regarded outsiders. The great towns of northern Europe, it must be remembered, were not originally "cities," sovereign bodies with a definite polity like those of the ancient classical world. The origin of them was the agricultural district, the land that gave subsistence to the clan, all the free men of which took part in the affairs of the community; the first towns were not as in Greece and Rome, the sacred spots of the tribal ancestor, but pallisaded places where convenience had made the population thicker than in other parts of the district. These as they grew kept their territory, and developed at last within themselves an aristocratic and oligarchic government.

But as these towns changed from being mere centres of an agricultural population, into being places of resort for handicraftsmen and merchants, and as the associations for the organisation of industry, that is the guilds, grew up amongst the former, a new democratic feeling rose up which opposed itself to the remains of the old tribal band of freemen, now become a mere exclusive oligarchy, who considered the practice of handicraft a disgrace.

The new democracy triumphed at last, and by the end of the thirteenth century the guilds, the actual workmen, were the masters of the great towns; under the feudal lords, however, to whom they owed homage and fealty.

Within the guilds themselves there could be no capitalists or great men, because the rules of the guilds were framed to prevent the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few, the masters were master workers, and were kept so by the rules aforesaid.

I suspect, however, that there were remains of the old municipal aristocracy (the lineages, as they were called in Flanders) still in existence in the towns, otherwise it would not be easy to account for the masterful position of James van Artevelde, and others whom we shall meet with later on in our story, who were certainly both wealthy and of importance, apart from any office they might happen to hold.

In Ghent also and elsewhere, notably at Bruges its rival, an aristocracy of the crafts was forming, as is apparent in the fact of the jealousy between the greater and the lesser crafts,¹ so that if the development of commerce joined with the rise of bureaucratic monarchy had not supervened and swept away the power and freedom of the towns altogether, the struggle between the municipal aristocracy and the craftsmen would have been repeated in the fifteenth century in another form.

Meantime, one thing is to be noted, which is specially interesting to us, and that is the visible existence of strong Communistic feeling along with the development of the gild democracy.

In the popular literature of the epoch one comes across passages whose mediæval quaintness gives a pleasant sense of surprise and freshness to aspirations and denunciations which are familiar enough to us Socialists to-day, and, so to say, at once make us free of the brotherhood of the old gildsmen. The two following centuries obliterated this feeling, or rather drew a dark veil of misery and degradation over all the feelings of the working-classes; but we now in our hope of better days soon to come can look back cheerfully to the times when the craftsman citizen of the great towns had his hope also, which he hands over to us across the lapse of the drearier days.

WILLIAM MORRIS.

(To be continued.)

NEWS OF JOHN DILLON.—John Dillon's health is reported to be improving. The prison doctor has extended the period of exercise from three to four hours a day, and full advantage is taken of the concession. A garden seat has also been provided. Dr. McDonnell takes great interest in his distinguished patient, and has friendly chats with him every day. Two local justices who visited Mr. Dillon state that he is in a cheerful mood, and appears entirely recovered from the excitement of the trial.

THE TITHE WAR IN WALES.—The proceedings in Anglesea are being characterised by scenes almost identical with those which followed the advent of Mr. Peterson for the Clergy Defence Association. The attacking party now acting in the interests of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners is, however, much stronger than on those occasions when Mr. Peterson was twice driven out of the island. On the 27th the forces engaged were ten emergency men, a sort of special bodyguard for Mr. Stevens, the acting agent for the Commissioners; thirty police constables under command of Colonel Thomas, chief constable of Anglesea; and a half company of the Cheshire Regiment from Chester Castle, under charge of Captain St. George and Lieut. Howard. The combined forces number 130 rank and file, the emergency men and police being armed with the regulation batons, and the infantry with rifles and an ample supply of ball cartridge. During the day there was an extraordinary series of scenes. Large crowds collected, carrying every imaginable instrument with which to create a noise. Free fights were indulged in, and during the afternoon the aspect of affairs became so serious that Mr. C. F. Priestley, J.P., read the Riot Act in English and in Welsh. Many farms were visited, and twenty miles of ground were covered, but the only result was the collection of a five-pound note. At one point the gorse lining the road was set ablaze, and some inconvenience was caused while marching through the stifling smoke. Cheers were given for Mr. Gladstone, and Messrs. Gee and Parry, the anti-tithe leaders; and exultation was expressed everywhere at the failure of the authorities to secure the tithes.

¹ The lesser crafts were the weavers and fullers, that is to say, the workmen of the staple industry of the country.