

THE COMMONWEAL

The Official Journal of the SOCIALIST LEAGUE.

VOL. 4.—No. 141.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 1888.

WEEKLY; ONE PENNY.

NOTES ON NEWS.

THE controversy between the *Daily News* and Mr. Davitt shows on what shallow foundations rests the hope that the Liberal party will deal satisfactorily with the Irish question. The whole matter for the *Daily News* is one of party politics; to import any reality into the question and look facts in the face appears, naturally enough from this point of view, an impertinence. Mr. Davitt is an interloper, "a dangerous firebrand," because he actually wishes to save his countrymen from the immediate miseries of eviction, and does not hesitate to say what he thinks will stir up some honest men to help in the matter. Anyone who has belonged to the Great Liberal Party at a crisis and has had strong opinions of his own at the time will at once recognise the true Whig flavour in the wretched snobbery of the *Daily News* article the other day; and Mr. Davitt's scorn which met it was most amply justified, whether he was right or not in his estimate of the present mind of English Liberals as to Ireland.

But surely he *was* right. No doubt the eyes of working men who are true to their class have been opened on the subject of Ireland, and Mr. Davitt can rely on these for support. But what is their power in the Liberal party? Next to nothing. Their enthusiasm has been wasted, they have been snubbed and Trafalgar-Squared, and in short treated as inconvenient persons—like Mr. Davitt.

The party, as a party, is apathetic, and the Irish constitutional section is pinned on to its apathy. The truth is that these Gladstonite Whigs can see nothing except the general election, which they believe, and probably rightly, will bring them into power once more. The swing of the pendulum will then most likely give us a Liberal government again; but as far as anything they can do, that prospect is not encouraging even as regards Ireland, which is the only question the *Daily News* and its masters will allow us to look at. When one comes to think that the serious consideration of the relations between the Irish tenant and his landlord and the advocacy of some kind of land nationalisation makes a man a "firebrand" in the eyes of the Great Liberal Party, one's raptures at the probable change of government are apt to be moderated.

What will happen? A compromise on Home Rule, a temporising measure in favour of the tenants, and the whole question as a real matter of everyday life handed over to the Socialists to deal with, and agitate upon.

Even the bourgeois papers call Mr. Saunders over the coals for his last appearance in the character of Nupkins. Of course people cannot help laughing at the monumental stupidity of the man; but it is just this stupidity which is the dangerous thing, for on such stupidity is based the immoveable cruelty of the governors to the governed. A man not irredeemably stupid could not help thinking, "Here is a poor man in a foreign country, whose language he cannot even talk, who is extra helpless and has been wronged: if I am so hard-hearted as not to feel for him, at any rate let me *pretend* to do so." Such wisdom is not to be had out of Nupkins; a hard fate drives him to proclaim his incurable stupidity, which has at least the effect of cruelty.

All this would not much matter if we read this week that Mr. Saunders has been dismissed in disgrace—which is not likely to happen; the freaks of an East End magistrate have nothing to do with the comfort of well-to-do people, for whom alone the laws are made, though they may inflict misery enough amongst the people whom he rules over, and who have no redress for his hard-dealing and insults.

The coming winter is not likely to lack its share of "discontent," which is becoming a thing to be looked for among the poor, just as "the Season" is among the rich. We are beginning early too; the pauper refuges full, meetings of unemployed, police attacks on them; prosecutions for violent speaking; this does not look very like the peace and prosperity we have been promised.

As to the prosecutions for violent speaking, it is much to be wished that the authorities will attack us in this way rather than by means of

their old sneaking obstruction tactics; it is much more satisfactory to go to prison for straightforward preaching of what is undoubtedly a dangerous doctrine, than for an offence which mixes up Socialists with Salvationists, etc. Only if we are to be run in for violent speaking, let it be for saying something that we shall not be ashamed to see quoted in the papers. Let it be for attacking the essence of our sham society, and not its accidents; let us in fact talk Socialism, for that may be both reasonable and violent at the same time. It is as well to have witnesses also, not for the sake of the police courts, where the magistrates will not heed them, but for the sake of putting ourselves right before the public and our comrades. As an author I know the unpleasantness of being misrepresented by newspaper critics; and I fear that police witnesses will not be much better than these.

According to the *Star*, the Salt Trust is to be succeeded by a Coal Trust, which will arrange matters (of course) for the benefit of the public, by taking care on the one hand that we don't get our coals too cheap, and on the other hand that the men shall be employed (as much as the employer finds it convenient to employ him). The promoters of the scheme are of course too modest to mention themselves, but clearly expect us to believe that they are actuated by the purest public spirit. The affair, along with others of a similar nature, is interesting to Socialists as showing in the first place that the unlimited competition on which our whole commercial system rests is beginning to break down, and in the second place the helplessness of the general public before the great capitalists: for of course, to drop irony, the real aim of these schemes is to rob both producer and consumer as safely and as much as possible. Meantime labour must pay for the whole game.

W. M.

Mr. George Kennan has recently written a series of articles in the *Century* which might be entitled, "The Russian Prison System from the Standpoint of the Superior Middle-class Person." In these he endeavours to prove that the Russian Nihilist is not the dangerous revolutionist of contemporary newspaper fiction; on the contrary he is a mild speculative individual, much addicted to reading Spencer and Comte, and looking upon the Republican Government in America as his highest administrative ideal.

Mr. Kennan has had some conversation with some of the Siberian exiles. He appears to have expected to meet a gang of murderous savages, who would perform a war dance while brandishing daggers and revolvers around the helpless tourists. Instead of this he encountered a number of mild young men and women, who might have done honour to a Young Men's Christian Association in any land but Russia.

Clearly either the Russian police or Mr. Kennan have made a serious mistake; still I cannot help thinking that some one has been gammoning Mr. Kennan. It is quite possible, too, that these exiles not knowing Mr. Kennan, and remarking that he was on very friendly terms with their jailers, hesitated at delivering themselves so freely in his presence as they otherwise might have done.

This worthy gentleman is very severe upon what he calls "incomprehensible cranks," whom he defines as "people with some education, a great deal of fanatical courage, and a limitless capacity for self-sacrifice, but with most visionary ideas of government and social organisation, and with only the faintest idea of what an American would call 'hard common sense.'" He goes on to observe, "I did not expect to have any more ideas in common with them than I should have in common with an Anarchist like Louis Lingg."

We have seen he was agreeably disappointed, and if the exiles he met with are anything like he represents them to be, we can only wonder at the stupidity of the Russian Government in exiling people with whom a respectable middle-class journalist like Mr. Kennan can sympathise. Much better to have given them a government post and thus effectively closed their mouths.

But let us examine Mr. Kennan's definition of "a incomprehensible crank" as a person of some education, a great deal of fanatical courage,