

THE COMMONWEAL

The Official Journal of the SOCIALIST LEAGUE.

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SATURDAY, MARCH 9, 1889.

WEEKLY; ONE PENNY.

CELEBRATION OF THE PARIS COMMUNE.

THE Celebration of the Eighteenth Anniversary of the Paris Commune (convened by the Socialist League and the Social Democratic Federation) will be held on

SATURDAY EVENING, MARCH 16th, at Eight prompt,

AT THE

SOUTH PLACE INSTITUTE,

SOUTH PLACE, MOORGATE STREET, E.C.

The following speakers will address the meeting:—

WM. MORRIS, H. QUELCH, D. NICOLL, JOHN BURNS, FRANK KITZ,
H. BURROWS, H. HALLIDAY SPARLING, A. S. HEADINGLEY, ELEANOR
MARX-AVELING, P. KROPOTKINE, LE MOUSSU, and E. BERNSTEIN.

CHAIRMAN: H. M. HYNDMAN

Selections of Music will be given during the Evening by Members and Friends of the Social Democratic Federation, and the Choir of the Socialist League will render the 'Marseillaise,' 'All for the Cause,' and 'When the Workers have their own again,' etc.

Comrades and friends are earnestly requested to take in hand the collection of money for the defrayal of expenses, for which purpose collection sheets have been issued. Donations may be sent to

W. H. LEE (S.D.F.), or F. KITZ (S.L.),
Organising Secretaries, 13, Farringdon Rd., E.C.

NOTES ON NEWS.

It is difficult indeed to say a word about the "Great Case" which has not already been said dozens of times. Socialists must of course join in the general rejoicing. If things had gone the other way the reactionaries would have been encouraged to more and more acts of oppression, and the *Times* newspaper would have been our master till we could have mustered strength to upset the whole concern. As things go the *Times* has been hit hard indeed; and although it is true that by taking things quietly and letting the days pass, it will in a few months regain something of the appearance of its old *prestige*, yet at all events its *forward* movement to take us all by the throat has been checked.

As to Mr. Parnell, he is not of us, and probably, in time to come, will be very much against us; but it would be ungenerous indeed not to rejoice in his triumph over such a vile crew as the *Times* and the Tory Government. On the other hand, we think no better of him for being cleared of the *crime* of being art and part with the revolutionary party in Ireland; and as to the famous or infamous letter, when the fac-simile first appeared in the columns of the *Friend of Informers*, I remember rubbing my eyes and saying to myself, "Why, what the devil has bit the *Times* now, where's the harm in that letter?"

For the Government of course the blow is serious; but the hopes of a speedy dissolution in which the *Star* and other Radicals are indulging are surely delusive. The Government majority on the amendment to the Address shows pretty clearly that though there may be some of the Tory party who are ashamed of the tactics of their leaders (now they have failed), yet they have no choice but to vote straight on a

division. Indeed, as to the shame, I doubt it; for politics make blackguards of us all.

However, when the general election does come, no doubt this defeat will go some way to overthrow the Tory party, and unless the unexpected weighs down the scales on the other side once more, we may look for a Gladstonian Parliament next time. Well, what then? As to Ireland compromise, and shelving the matter until it reappears, one may well hope, with a far more revolutionary aspect. As to the country in general? Well, what we may reasonably expect is, that the New Gladstonian Parliament will think that they have done enough for the popular side in conceding some crippled Home Rule to Ireland, and will set their face against any serious change in England. And on the whole I think that this which is likely to happen is the best thing that could happen. For there are many Radicals, and perhaps some Socialists, who expect *much* from a new Liberal Parliament, and if they get *nothing* perhaps they will bestir *themselves* a little, and try to push things forward.

For just think, while all these fine ladies and gentlemen, these miracles of refinement and cultivation, were crowding into the Court as into a theatre, to enjoy themselves over this judicial drama, the point of which was to find out, whether a certain Parliamentary leader was more or less mixed up with an enthusiastic and generous attack (though made on grounds that we should not agree with) on that great reactionary power, the British Empire—while all this was going on, and the corruption of well-to-do society was day by day being exposed, all around them thousands of poor people were (and are) dying of starvation and living in torment, without a hand being held out to help them. Anything is good enough to obscure the thought of *that* and what will come of it—though nothing worse than itself *can* come of it. And there is no wonder in that, for all this suffering is the foundation of "Society." Touch it, attempt seriously to remedy it, and down topples that false Society itself—and there is the remedy, and there is no other. W. M.

As comrade John Burns well said when speaking there, the meeting of the Metropolitan Radical Federation, of which a report will be found elsewhere, marked an era in the history of the struggle for free speech. The picked men of the working-men's Liberal and Radical clubs were met together, resolute, angry, ready to do anything—if they could but resolve on what was to do. They would have nothing whatever to do with the cowardly proposal to get parliament to "legalise" their meetings. The right of public meeting antedated parliament by centuries; it was one of those imprescriptible rights which the people had never delegated to any legislature. They would not be "allowed" to do that which was well within their right. Such was the clearly expressed feeling of the meeting right through.

The two Liberal members who came down to direct, remained to be rebuked and badgered. They were beginning to feel a little uncomfortable, when Sir Charles Russell came in, and their faces cleared. But they soon clouded again, not to clear for the rest of the evening, when they found how futile was the would-be *coup-d'état*, and how little even the "old lion of the law courts" could do for them. To see Mr. Pickersgill gradually lose his grandiose air, and plead and wriggle like a frightened pettifogger under the stern questioning of his judges! Mr. Morgan, his companion, met with a less severe reception, for he was obviously a good honest old man, a survival from bygone days. But more instructive than all, was to see Sir Charles Russell straining every nerve to master a hostile audience—of Liberals and Radicals!—and failing.

All his *prestige* and the greatness of his power could do nothing for him. The old familiar shibboleths fell on deaf ears—deaf to everything but "Free Speech" and "Trafalgar Square." And it was by no means an audience of Socialists; the delegates of Socialist organisations were in a very small minority. The fiercest speeches were made by the delegates of Liberal clubs and similar bodies; from the body of the meeting came the shouts of denunciation, the short bitter sen-

stances that stung Sir Charles into rage and whitened the face of Mr. Pickering. So infuriated were the Radicals by the thought of the treachery wrought against them that it was the Socialists who again and again, by immense effort, secured a hearing for "the accused." This was so marked that Mr. Morgan admitted it to a League delegate after the meeting.

It was a time to be remembered, that night on which the old party ties were shown to have been destroyed by the batons of Bloody Sunday. Amid immense cheering, the delegate of the Deptford Liberal Club declared that Liberal and Tory were alike when the claims of labour were in question; that the meetings in Trafalgar Square might have added as much again to the forty years during which they have been allowed, had not the unemployed come to "show their rags there." And if the Liberals want to win back the allegiance of the London workmen by the next election, they will have to begin early and bid high.

Meanwhile, we Socialists should take heart from the "stirring of the dry bones," and work on unwearied. Who knows but our day is much nearer than we dream of?

S.

A MINSTREL COMMUNIST.

We have suffered quite a loss lately, in this neighbourhood, in the death of our old friend, Joseph Sharpe; and as a specimen of one of the people—of native feeling, dignity, gentleness, in the very poorest walks, and of that desire for and belief in a better social life, which runs like a golden thread through the thoughts of the real workers in all lands—it may be worth while to put on record some little account of him.

At the time when I first knew him, some ten years ago, Mr. Sharpe was sixty-two or sixty-three years of age; had a somewhat military air, like an old-fashioned colonel or general, but in very reduced circumstances; a heavy grey moustache, handsome profile, and youthful, even jaunty carriage. Only a few weeks before he died—last January—he presented much the same appearance, working—in red scarf and old greatcoat—in a corner of one of my fields. Sometimes, when smartened up a bit on Sunday or other day, and walking briskly up the lane, I would from the distance wonder what young man it was coming to pay me a visit. The same youthfulness characterised his mind. Notwithstanding all the reverses and struggles of a long and hard life, he possessed an indomitable power of hope, a sanguine innocence which saw no difficulties ahead as soon as he had set his mind on a thing. Only a year or two before he died, he said to me one day, "To belong to a Communistic society has always been the dream of my life, and I don't despair of it now. Peace and goodwill and true fraternity—that's what we want."

In fact, at the time when, as I have said, I first knew him, he had just been joining in an experiment for the realisation of peace and fraternity. A small body—about a dozen—of men calling themselves Communists, mostly great talkers, had joined together with the idea of establishing themselves on the land somewhere; and I have understood that it was at their instance that John Ruskin bought the small farm (of thirteen acres or so) at Topley near Sheffield, which he afterwards made over to S. George's Guild, and which now, under the name of S. George's Farm, has been put in the hands of another, less voluble and more practical, body of Communists—John Furniss, George Pearson, and Co. However that may be, it is certain that the first-mentioned set of men—of whom William Harrison Riley, formerly editor of the *International Herald*, was one of the most active, and among them our friend Joseph Sharpe—did for a short time occupy S. George's Farm. Their idea was not (at any rate at first) to abandon their various occupations in and around Sheffield, but to give their spare time to communal work at the farm, and in some way to share its produce—the scheme including, as most Communistic schemes seem to do, some project for the establishment of a school on the place. Unfortunately the usual dissensions arose—usual, I would say, wherever work of this kind is ruled by theories instead of by practical human needs and immediate desire of fellowship. The promoters of this scheme knew next to nothing of agriculture—being chiefly bootmakers, ironworkers, opticians, and the like—and naturally were ready to dogmatise in proportion to their ignorance: and in a very short time they were hurling anathemas at each other's heads; peace and fraternity were turned into missiles and malice; the wives entered into the fray; and the would-be garden of Eden became such a scene of confusion that Ruskin had to send down an ancient retainer of his (with a pitchfork instead of a flaming sword) to bar them all out.

Mr. Sharpe, probably, in his naive way, was as much convinced that his theories were the right ones, and that failure was due to their not being followed, as any one. He was at this time a harpist by profession, and believed in the harmonies of the spheres; but he thought, as he often told me, that discipline was very necessary in order to create harmony; and there, perhaps, he was right: but, alas! who was to enforce it? He had had, I believe, some experience of the same kind of thing before, at Mount Sorrel, near Leicester, where he was born. His life had been a curiously diversified one—always with this dream of human communism floating over it. He laughed when he told me that he was apprenticed to a butcher, saying "I couldn't kill a goose, never." Then he went into the police force for a time—by way of a change; and after that got employment in a factory. Factory work, however, becoming slack, and as he was now

married, and a small family growing up, he bought a harp. "Do you see, I had a good voice—I was about thirty then—and I thought that if I was thrown out of work I could make a little by singing up and down. Having a young family makes you anxious. Well, I worked hard at the harp for three years, and could play pretty well at the end of that time; and I soon began to make quite a good thing by singing and playing: so that when the time came that I was thrown out I took to that entirely." There was possibly another reason for taking up the harp. The Chartist movement was going on at that time. Our friend, as may be imagined, was an ardent enthusiast for the five-point Charter—to be enforced by points of steel if necessary; he had often drilled with his comrades in the deserted granite-quarries of Mount Sorrel; they had muskets and other weapons hidden away in their homes. Possibly he thought it would be as well to have a trade at his finger-ends which would make him independent of locality or of the caprice of an employer. Anyhow the new trade stood him in good stead. He went about Leicester and neighbourhood, enlarging the circuit of his wanderings, till one day he came to Sheffield. "Well, I suppose they had hardly ever seen a harp in Sheffield before, and it took wonderfully. I was out at one public-house or another every evening—couldn't get away—and there was no early closing then. At last I had to bring my wife and family over and settle there; and Fred was growing up, and I taught him the fiddle; and from the time he was about twelve he accompanied me about, and has done ever since. We did very well then—made many pounds a week often—going to village-feasts; but it's not the same now."

In truth they were a pair of good musicians—both endowed with ear and taste superior to the kind of work they were often called upon to perform,—the father with a fine voice and considerable dexterity in accompaniment, the son hardly at a loss for any tune on the fiddle that might be asked for. The village feasts were a great institution at that time. They lasted for a week in each locality, beginning on the Saturday evening and extending to the following Saturday. The ancient pagan or pre-Christian practice of "well-dressing" often formed part of the festival; indeed, this custom is still kept up in some of the remoter villages of Derbyshire, and the chief well or fountain in a village is adorned with greenery, sometimes very cunningly and tastefully (as, for instance, I have seen Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter, represented by human figures elegantly inlaid in flower-heads on a green background, inside the porch of a well otherwise decorated with leaves and branches). The neighbours would congregate to these feasts from miles round; dancings and drinkings went on all night long in farm parlours and public-house upper chambers, sleepings in barns and on kitchen settles and floors, and frolics (and some work!) during the day. I have been down with the old man and his son into Lincolnshire—where the feasts are yet maintained with some spirit—taking my turn with them to carry the harp (and I found it no light weight—54 lbs.), through the byelanes around Horncastle and Coningsby, and dancing at night on sanded board floors with the young fellows and occasionally girls (though these jewels are rarer) of the locality, and enjoyed the times much.

But the advent of the railroads had already begun to tell upon the rural life. As the importance of the villages waned, and the agricultural population began to flow towards the towns, the feasts also began to fall off. People began to save their cash and their holidays for trips to the seaside and day excursions to London, and the money dribbled away from the old channels. After a few years Joseph Sharpe began to find his receipts diminishing, and the last twenty years of his life were a pretty continuous struggle with poverty. He opened a small shop in Sheffield, which his wife attended to while he was out playing, but there was not much to be got out of it; then came the *fiasco* at St. George's Farm; and after that there was little left to look to. He did not, however, lose his native pluck and hopefulness. There was something almost Quixotic about his dignity of manner and generosity under circumstances which would have justified a very different bearing; as, for instance, when he would, travelling by train with a companion, insist on paying fares for both, though he could ill afford it; or spread his table with the last he had for a casual visitor. In this respect his communism was not of that kind which makes free with other people's goods, and is niggardly of its own. His love of literature and the ideal tendency of his mind stood him in good stead in these times; to get hold of a book on Astronomy or the poems of Shelley was to forget all his troubles. Latterly he would make me translate to him, as best I could, the 'Divina Commedia' of Dante, and ultimately he bought himself Cary's translation of the 'Inferno.' On his bookshelf were Humboldt's 'Cosmos,' Pickering's 'Races of Man,' and several old-fashioned works on Physiology, a subject of which he was very fond.

Meanwhile, and notwithstanding a falling exchequer, he managed to bring up a small family and send them out into the world. One of his daughters went to Australia, and it was always a great day for him when a letter came from her, or a *Sydney Bulletin*—a paper he was very pleased with on account of its Socialist tendency. Indeed, the growth of the Socialist movement gave our friend a new impetus and object in life. *Commonweal* and *Justice* and *Freedom*, and other Socialist papers and pamphlets, were carried by him to remote villages and public houses through Derbyshire, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire, and the amount of propagandist work done by him in this way was probably very considerable. He enjoyed an argument, too, and was not easily worsted, for though in detail his ideas were crude and theoretic, and often quite vague and unclear, still he possessed a truly British obstinacy which never knew when it was beaten, and also a certain ease and grace of expression that gave credit to the general