

NEWS FROM NOWHERE:

OR,

AN EPOCH OF REST.

BEING SOME CHAPTERS FROM A UTOPIAN ROMANCE.

CHAP. XXIV. (continued).—UP THE THAMES: THE SECOND DAY.

HOWEVER, that mattered little to us; the nights were light, for the moon was shining in her third quarter, and it was all one to Dick whether he sculled or sat quiet in the boat: so we went away a great pace. The evening sun shone bright on the remains of the old buildings at Medmenham; close beside which arose an irregular pile of building which Dick told us was a very pleasant house; and there were plenty of houses visible on the wide meadows opposite, under the hill; and we had seen before that the beauty of Hurley had compelled people to build and live there a good deal. The sun very low down showed us Henley little altered in outward aspect from what I remembered it. Actual daylight failed us as we passed through the lovely reaches of Wargrave and Shiplake; but the moon rose behind us presently. I should like to have seen with my eyes what success the new order of things had had in getting rid of the sprawling mess with which commercialism had littered the banks of the wide stream about Reading and Caversham: certainly everything smelt too deliciously in the early night for there to be any of the old careless sordidness of so-called manufacture; and in answer to my question as to what sort of a place Reading was, Dick answered—

“O, a nice town enough in its way; mostly rebuilt within the last hundred years; and there are a good many houses, as you can see by the lights just down under the hills yonder. In fact, it is one of the most populous places on the Thames round about here. Keep up your spirits, Guest! we are close to our journey's end for the night. I ought to ask your pardon for not stopping at one of the houses here or higher up; but a friend who is living in a very pleasant house in the Maple-durham meads particularly wanted me and Clara to come and see him on our way up Thames; and I thought you wouldn't mind this bit of night travelling.”

He need not have adjured me to keep up my spirits, which were as high as possible; though the strangeness and excitement of the happy and quiet life which I saw everywhere around me was, it is true, a little wearing off, yet a deep content, as different as possible from languid acquiescence, was taking its place, and I was, as it were, really new-born.

We landed presently just where I remembered the river making an elbow to the north towards the ancient house of the Blunts; with the wide meadows spreading on the right-hand side, and on the left the long line of beautiful old trees overhanging the water. As we got out of the boat, I said to Dick—

“Is it the old house we are going to?”

“No,” he said, “though that is standing still in green old age, and is well inhabited. I see, by the way, that you know your Thames well. But my friend Walter Allen, who asked me to stop here, lives in a house, not very big, which has been built here lately, because these meadows are so much liked, especially in summer, that there was getting to be rather too much of tenting on the open field; so the parishes here about, who rather objected to it, built three houses between this and Caversham, and quite a large one at Basildon, a little higher up. Look, yonder are the lights of Walter Allen's house!”

So we walked over the grass of the meadows under a flood of moonlight, and soon came to the house, which was low and built round a quadrangle big enough to get plenty of sunshine in it. Walter Allen, Dick's friend, was leaning against the jamb of the doorway waiting for us, and took us into the hall without overplus of words. There were not many people in it, as some of the dwellers there were away at the haymaking in the neighbourhood, and some, as Walter told us, were wandering about the meadow enjoying the beautiful moonlit night. Dick's friend looked to be a man of about forty; tall, black-haired, very kind-looking and thoughtful; but rather to my surprise there was a shade of melancholy on his face, and he seemed a little abstracted and inattentive to our chat, in spite of obvious efforts to listen.

Dick looked at him from time to time, and seemed troubled; and at last he said: “I say, old fellow, if there is anything the matter which we didn't know of when you wrote to me, don't you think you had better tell us about it at once? or else we shall think we have come here at an unlucky time and are not quite wanted.”

Walter turned red, and seemed to have some difficulty in restraining his tears, but said at last: “Of course everybody here is very glad to see you, Dick, and your friends; but it is true that we are not at our best, in spite of the fine weather and the glorious hay-crop. We have had a death here.”

Said Dick: “Well, you should get over that, neighbour: such things must be.”

“Yes,” Walter said, “but this was a death by violence, and it seems likely to lead to at least one more: and somehow it makes us feel rather shy of one another; and to say the truth, that is one reason why there are so few of us present to-night.”

“Tell us the story, Walter,” said Dick; “perhaps telling it will help you to shake off your sadness.”

Said Walter: “Well, I will; and I will make it short enough, though I daresay it might be spun out into a long one, as used to be done with such subjects in the old novels. There is a very charming girl here whom we all like, and whom some of us do more than like; and she very

naturally liked one of us better than anybody else. And another of us (I won't name him) got fairly bitten with love-madness, and used to go about making himself as unpleasant as he could—not of malice prepose, of course; so that the girl, who liked him well enough at first, though she didn't love him, began fairly to dislike him. Of course, those of us who knew him best—myself amongst others—advised him to go away, as he was making matters worse and worse for himself every day. Well, he wouldn't take our advice (that also, I suppose, was a matter of course), so we had to tell him that he *must* go, or the inevitable sending to Coventry would follow; for his individual trouble had so overmastered him that we felt that *we* must go if he did not.”

“He took that better than we expected, when something or other—an interview with the girl, I think, and some hot words with the successful lover following close upon it, threw him quite off his balance; and he got hold of an axe and fell upon his rival when there was no one by; and in the struggle that followed the man attacked hit him an unlucky blow and killed him. And now the slayer in his turn is so upset that he is like to kill himself; and if he does, the girl will do as much, I fear. And all this we could no more help than the earthquake of the year before last.”

“It is very unhappy,” said Dick; “but since the man is dead, and cannot be brought to life again, and since the slayer had no malice in him, I cannot for the life of me see why he shouldn't get over it before long. Why should a man brood over a mere accident for ever? And the girl?”

“As to her,” said Walter, “the whole thing seems to have inspired her with terror rather than grief. What you say about the man is true, or it should be; but then, you see, the excitement and jealousy that was the prelude to this tragedy had made an evil and feverish element round about him, from which he does not seem to be able to escape. However, we have advised him to go away—in fact, to cross the seas; but he is in such a state that I do not think he *can* go unless someone *takes* him, and I think it will fall to my lot to do so; which is scarcely a cheerful outlook for me.”

“O, you will find a certain kind of interest in it,” said Dick. “And of course he *must* soon look upon the affair from a reasonable point of view sooner or later.”

“Well, at any rate,” quoth Walter, “now that I have eased my mind by making you uncomfortable, let us have an end of the subject for the present. Are you going to take your guest to Oxford?”

“Why, of course we must pass through it,” said Dick, smiling, “as we are going into the upper waters; but I thought that we wouldn't stop there, or we shall be belated as to the haymaking up our way. So Oxford and my learned lecture on it, all got at second-hand from my old kinsman, must wait till we come down the water a fortnight hence.”

I listened to all this story with much surprise, and could not help wondering at first that the man who had slain the other had not been put in custody till it could be proved that he had killed his rival in self-defence only. However, the more I thought of it, the plainer it grew to me that no amount of examination of witnesses, who had witnessed nothing but the ill-blood between the two rivals, would have done anything to clear up the case. I could not help thinking, also, that the remorse of this homicide gave point to what old Hammond had said to me about the way in which this strange people dealt with what I had been used to hear called crimes. Truly, that remorse was exaggerated; but it was quite clear that the slayer took the whole consequences of the act upon himself, and did not expect society to whitewash him by punishing him. I had no fear any longer that “the sacredness of human life” was likely to suffer amongst my friends from the absence of gallows and prison.

WILLIAM MORRIS.

TO BE CONTINUED.]

(This Story began in No. 209, January 11, 1890. A few sets of Back Numbers can still be had.)

DO YOU WISH TO HELP THE SOCIALIST CAUSE?

IF YOU DO—Then join the Socialist League, or the local Socialist Society, and take your share in the work of educating the slaves of modern society to know how they may win their freedom.

Speak about Socialism in public and in private; at the club, in the local discussion society, or through the local newspapers; among your friends, acquaintances, and shopmates.

Take a few copies of the *Commonweal* and pamphlets weekly, and distribute them where you think they will do most good. Leaflets, too, are very useful. Insist upon your newsagent getting the *Commonweal* for you, and if he refuses get your other papers at another shop where they are more obliging. You might also leave a few other copies, and get him to show a bill by a little “gentle persuasion.”

Leave a *Commonweal* weekly on the table of your club-room, in the meeting-room of your trade society. Better still, order a supply of *Commonweal* from the publishing office every week, and sell them among your shopmates and the members of the societies you belong to, or leave them in the local public reading-room.

If there is no local Socialist Society, get a few sympathisers together and form a propagandist group, collect enough money amongst them to cover railway travelling expenses, and, after selecting a hall or a couple of open-air spots suitable for holding meetings, invite a speaker from one of the nearest towns, or London, to pay you a visit and publicly advocate *Socialism*.

Remember! it is the *ignorance* of the workers that alone postpones the day of the Social Revolution.