June 21, 1890.

THE COMMONWEAL.

NEWS FROM NOWHERE:

OR, AN EPOCH OF REST.

BEING SOME CHAPTERS FROM A UTOPIAN ROMANCE.

CHAP. XVIII.—THE BEGINNING OF THE NEW LIFE.

"Well," said I, "so you got clear out of all your troubles. Were people satisfied with the new order of things when it came?"

"Well, surely almost all must have been good of peace when it came; especially when they were so few; and also, they found, that after all, they—even the once-rich—were not living very badly. As to those who had been poor, all through the war, which lasted for many years, they had been in the struggle; and when peace came at last, in a very short time they made great strides towards a decent life. The great difficulty was that the once-poor had such a feasible conception of the real pleasure of life: so that when they had reason enough, from the new state of things. It was perhaps a good thing that the necessity for restoring the wealth destroyed during the war forced them into working at first almost as hard as they had been in the Revolutionary. For all historians are agreed that there never was a war in which there was so much destruction of vices and instruments for making them as in this civil war."

"I am rather glad," said I.

"Are you? I don’t see why," said Hammond.

"Why," said I, "because the party of order would surely look upon the wealth as their own properly, and would have no share of it unless they helped it, should go to their slaves, supposing they conquered. And on the other hand, it was just for the possession of that wealth that the ‘rebels’ were fighting, and I should have thought, especially when they saw thing how meek, that they had been careful to destroy as little as possible of what was soon to be their own."

"It was as I have told you, however," said he. "The party of order might have taken their worst retaliation of surprise—or, if you please, when they fairly saw that, whatever happened to them, there would not be ruined, fought with great bitterness, and cared little what they did, so long as they injured the enemies who had destroyed the streets. And the rebels, I have told you that the outbreak of actual war made them careless of trying to save the wretched parts of wealth that they had. It was a common saying amongst them that the greater the loss would be of everything except valiant living men, rather than that we fall into slavery."

He sat silently thinking a while, and then said: "Do you see what it means? In the times which you are thinking of, and of which you have heard, there was no hope; nothing but the dull joy of the mill-horse under the coals and whip; but in that fighting-time that followed, all was hope: the rebels at least felt themselves strong enough to build up the world again from its dry bones,—and they did it too!" said the old man, his eyes glittering under his beetle brow. He went on: "And their opponents at least and at last learned something about the reality of life, and its sorrows, which they had been emotionally, and from one hand to the other, the two combatants, the workman and the gentleman, between them—"

"Between them," said I, quickly, "they destroyed commercialism!"

"Nor could it have been destroyed otherwise; except, perhaps, by the march of morality, until the race fell into lower depths, till it should at last reach a condition as rude as barbarism, but lacking both the hope and the pleasures of barbarism. Surely, then, whatever remedy was the happiest."

"Most surely," said I.

"Yes," said the old man, "the world was being brought to its second birth; how could that take place without a tragedy. Moreover, think of it. The spirit of the new days of our days, was to be born in the life of the world; intense and almost overweening love of the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells, such as a lover has in the fair flesh of the woman he loves; this, I say, was to be the new spirit of the time. All other moods save this had been exhausted: the unceasing criticism, the boundless curiosity in the ways and thoughts of which the mood of the ancient Greek, to whom these things were not so much to him as an end, was gone past recovery; nor had there been really any shadow of it in the so-called science of the nineteenth century, which, as you must know, was in the past, yes, and forever."

"Then why this new thing?"

"But that also, with its assured belief in heaven and hell as two countries in which to live, has gone, and now we do, both in word and in deed, believe in the continuous life of the world of men, and as it were, each day of that common life to the little stock of days which our own mere individual experience wins for us: and consequently we are happy. Do you wonder at it? In times past, indeed, men were told to love their kind, to believe in the religion of humanity, and so forth. But look you, just in the degree that a man had conception of mind and volition enough to be able to raise this idea, was drive repelled by the obvious aspect of the individuals composing the mass which he was to worship, and could only evade that repulsion by making a conventional abstraction of mankind that had little scent of historical relations; the result was that the one race, which having to keep tyrants on the one hand and apathetic degraded slaves on the other. But now, where is the difficulty in accepting the religion of humanity when the men of our common life are to go make up humanity as free, happy, and energetic at least, and most especially beautiful of body also, and surrounded by beautiful things of their own fashioning, and a nature bettered and not worsened by contact with mankind. This is the fact, and the world has reserved for us."

"It seems true," I said, "or ought to be, if what my eyes have seen is a token of the general life you lead. Can you now tell me anything of your great progress?"

"Beginning of the new life, you mean?"

"Yes," I said.

"I could easily tell you more than you have time to listen to; but I can at least hint at one of the chief difficulties which had to be met: and that was, that when men began to settle down after the war, and their labour had pretty much filled up the gap in wealth caused by the destruction of that war, a kind of disappointment seemed coming over us, and the prophecies of some of the reactionists of past times seemed as if they would come true, and a dull level of utilitarian comfort be the end for a while of our aspirations and successes. The loss of the competitive spur to exertion had not, indeed, done anything to interfere with the necessary production of the community, but how if it shall lead to a slacken in our thought or idle musings. But, after all, this dull thunder-cloud only threatened us, and then passed over. Probably, from what I have told you before, you will have a guess at the remedy for such a disaster; remembering always that many of the things which used to be produced—slave-wares for the poor and mere wealth-wasting wares for the rich—ceased to be made. That remedy was, in short, the production of what used to be called art, but which has no name amongst us now because it has become a necessary part of the labour of every man who produces."

"I said: "What? Had men any time or opportunity for cultivating the fine arts amidst the desperate struggle for life and freedom that you have told me of?"

"I said: "You must not suppose that the new form of art was founded chiefly on the means of the art of the past; although strange to say, the civil war was much less destructive of art than of other things, and although what of art existed under the old forms revived in a wonderful way during the latter part of the struggle, the art of music and poetry. The art and work-pleasures, as one ought to call it, of which I am now speaking, sprang up almost spontaneously, it seems, from a kind of instinct amongst people, no longer driven desperately to paint or do terrible over-work, to do the best they could with the work in hand—to make it excellent of its kind; and then when that had gone on for a little, a craving for beauty seemed to awaken in men’s minds, and they began rude and awkwardly to ornament the wares which they made; and when they had once set to work at that, it soon began to grow. All this was much helped by the abolition of the servile our immediate ancestors put up with; but I am not talking of that."

"And the life which now grew (as I told you before) to be common amongst us. Thus at last and by slow degrees we got pleasure into our work; then we became conscious of that pleasure, and cultivated it, and took care that we should cultivate the skill of it, and the result was that all was gained, and we were happy. So it may be for ages!"

The old man fell into a reverie, not altogether without melancholy, I thought; but I did not break it. Suddenly he started, and said: "Well, dear guest, here are come Dick and Clara to fetch you away, and there is an end of my talk; which I daroys you will not be sorry for; the long day is coming to an end, and you will have a pleasant ride back to Hammersmuth."

WILLIAM MORRIS.

TO BE CONTINUED.

(After the preceding pages a modern colophon is added by the editor):

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

A SOCIAL MEETING

AND CONFERENCE OF LONDON REVOLUTIONISTS

WILL BE HELD

AT THE INTERNATIONAL CLUB,

40 BERNE STREET, E.

On Tuesday, June 25th, at 8.30 p.m.

All Revolutionary Socialists are invited, whether members of societies, clubs, or not. Of the London Revolutionary Clubs especially invited.

The position of the Revolutionary Organ, and the best means of extending their circulation, will be discussed.

A great number of well known comrades and societies have already promised to take part in the meeting.

A Concert and Dancing will follow the conference. Admission free. All anti-parliamentary Socialists are urged to attend.

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