THE COMMONWEAL

July 6, 1890

NEWS FROM NOWHERE:

AN EPOCH OF REST.

BEING SOME CHAPTERS FROM A UTOPIAN ROMANCE.

CHAP. XVII. (continued)—How the Change Came.

"But the measures passed for the relief of the workers, though to the upper classes they seemed ruinously revolutionary, were not thorough enough to give the people food and a decent life, and they had to be supported by enactments which were merely of a temporary character. Although the Government and Parliament had the law-courts, the army and "society" at their backs, the Committee of Public Safety began to be a force in the country, and really represented the producing classes. It began to express the general sentiment of those for which it stood, in the acquisition of its members. Its old members had little administrative capacity, though with the exception of a few self-seekers and traitors, its most, courageous, and capable of any of them was possessed of talent with considerable talent. But now that the times called for immediate action, came forward the men capable of setting it on foot; and a great network of workmen's associations grew up very speedily, whose avowed object was the tidying over of the ship of the community into a simple condition of Communism; and as they practically undertook also the management of the ordinary labour war, they soon became the mouthpiece and intermediary of the whole of the working classes, and the manufacturing profit-grinders now found themselves powerless before this combination; unless their committee, Parliament, plucked up courage to begin the civil war again, and to shoot right and left, they were bound to yield to the demands of the body of men whom they employed, and pay higher and higher wages for shorter and shorter days' work.

Yet one ally they had, and that was the rapidly approaching breakdown of the system on which was founded in the whole of Europe and its supply, which now became so clear to all people that the middle classes, shocked for the moment into condemnation of the Government for the great massacre, turned round nearly in a mass, and called on the Government to look to matters and put an end to the tyranny of the Socialist leaders.

"Thus stimulated, the reactionist plot exploded probably before it was fully developed, and both the people and their leaders were forewarned, and before the reactionaries could get under way had taken the steps they thought necessary."

The Liberal Government (clearly by collusion) was beaten by the Conservative party in all the boroughs which in the minority. The popular representatives in the House understood pretty well what this meant, and after an attempt to fight the matter out by divisions in the House, they made a protest, left the House, and came in a body to the Committee of Public Safety: and the civil war began again in good earnest.

"Yet its first act was not one of mere fighting. The new Tory Government determined to act, yet durst not re-enact the state of siege, but it sent a body of soldiers and police to arrest the Committee of Public Safety in the lump. They made no resistance, though they might have done so, as they had now a considerable body of men who were quite prepared for extremities. But they were determined to try first a weapon which they thought stronger than street fighting."

The members of the Committee went quietly to prison; but the immediate action of the organisations had been felt. They depended not on a carefully arranged centre with all kinds of checks and counter checks about it, but on a huge mass of people in thorough sympathy with their cause, actuated by a great number of links of small centres with very simple instruction. These instructions were now carried out.

"The next morning, when the leaders of the reaction were shuffling at the effect which the report in the newspapers of their stroke would have upon the people, no newspapers appeared; and it was only too soon to a few straggling sheets, about the size of the gazettes of the seven towns, were disseminated by policemen, soldiers, managers, and press writers, were dribbled through the streets. They were greedily seized on and read; but by this time the serious part of their news was stale, and people did not need to be told that the General Strike had begun. The railways did not run, the telegraph wires were unstreamed; fish, flesh, and green stuff brought to market was allowed to lie there still packed and perish; the thousands of middle-class families, who were usually prompt in their next meal on the workers, made frantic efforts through their mere occasional centre in the market for the rest of the day, and amongst those of them who could throw off the fear of what was to follow, there was, I am told, a certain enjoyment of this unusual experiment—a forecast of the days to come, in which all labour grew pleasant."

"So passed the first day, and towards evening the Government grew quite confused. They had but one resource for putting down any popular movement, and that was to take their cue from another, which in this case was for them against which to use their army and police: no armed bodies appeared in the streets; the offices of the federated workmen were not bombarded, but those of the police and the railways were thrown out of work, and under the circumstances they durst not arrest the men engaged in such work: all the more, as even that many quick actions were unable applied at these offices for relief, and swallowed down the charity of the workers with their supplications. The Government massed soldiers and police here and there—and sat still for that night, fully expecting on the morrow some manifesto from the rebels, as they now began to be called, which would give them an opportunity of acting in some way or another." They were disappointed.

The ordinary newspapers gave up the struggle that morning, and only one very violent reactionary paper (called the Daily Telegraph) attempted an appearance, and rated the 'rebels' in good set terms for 'distracting the public mind,' and 'insulting' the British mother," the English Nation, for the benefit of a few greedy paid agitators and the fools whom they were deluding. On the other hand, the radical journals (of which several new issues, supplied to different schools, were published in London) came out full to the throat of the well-printed matter. They were greedily bought by the whole public, who, of course, like the Government, expected a manifesto in the morning, which it was, of course, their duty to suppress. But it seemed as if their editors had ransacked their drawers for articles which would have been in place forty years before, under the technical name of 'educational articles' and straightforward expositions of the doctrines and practice of Socialism, free from hate and spite and hard words, and came upon the public with a kind of May-day freshness, amidst the worry and terror of the moment; and though the knowing well understood that the meaning of this move in the game was mere defance, and a token of irremovable hostility to the then rulers of society, and though, also, they were meant for nothing less than to make the public really feel their effect as 'educational articles.' However, 'education' of another kind was acting upon them with irresistible power, and probably cleared their heads a little.

"As to the Government, they were absolutely terrified by the act of 'boycotting' (the slang word then current for such acts of abstention). Their counsellors became wild and vacillating to the last degree: they were prepared for giving way, and even for making another plot; the next they all but sent an order for the arrest in the lump of all the workmen's committees; the next they were on the point of ordering their brick young general to take any excuse that offered for another massacre. But when they called to mind that the soldiery in that 'Battle of Trafalgar Square were so daunted by the slaughter which they had made that they could not be got to fire a second volley, they shrank back from the thought of carrying out another massacre. Meantime the prisoners, brought the second time before the magistrates under a strong escort of soldiers, were the second time remanded.

"The strike went on this day also. The workmen's committees were extended, and gave relief to great numbers of people, for they had organised a considerable amount of production of food by men whom they could depend upon. Quite a number of well-do-do people were now compelled to seek relief of them. But another curious thing happened: a band of young men of the upper classes armed themselves, and coolly went marauding in the streets, taking what suited them with rifles and revolvers, and burnt down a warehouse which had ventured to open. This operation they carried out in Oxford Street, then a great street of shops of all kinds. The Government, being at the house in one of their yielding moods, thought this fine opportunity for showing their impartiality in the maintenance of order, and sent to arrest these hungry rich youths; who, however, surprised the police by a valiant resistance, so that all but three escaped. The Government did not gain any reputation for impartiality which they expected from this move; for they forgot that there were no evening papers; and the account of the skirmish spread wide indeed, but in a distorted form, for it was all told simply to the East-end; and everybody thought it was but natural for the Government to put them down when and where they could."

WILLIAM MORRIS.

(To be continued.)

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

5TH ANIVERSARY OF THE INTERNATIONAL WORKING MEN'S CLUB, BERNER STREET.

The 5th Anniversary of the above Club will be celebrated on Sunday, June 10th, at the hour of 2 p.m., at the Tottenham House, 25, Berner Street, H. H. Morris will preside, and among others who will address the gathering will be F. Proudhon, Stepney, J. Turner, Janovski, H. Spargo, and Felgen- C. C. Turner, D. C. Turner, M.P., and Joseph, whose Harmon- smith concert will render revolutionary songs. To begin at 4 p.m.

Courts Fund.—Amount already acknowledged—£8 18s. 10d. Received— Anthony Green, F. Friend, 18, Ed.; Reidland in Newcastle, 1, 2. Talbert.

Erlauter.—Comrade W. H. Chaplin presided over the Annual Conference, notwithstanding last week's issue.