

# THE COMMONWEAL

## The Official Journal of the SOCIALIST LEAGUE.

VOL. 6.—No. 228.

SATURDAY, MAY 24, 1890.

WEEKLY; ONE PENNY.

### NEWS FROM NOWHERE:

OR,

### AN EPOCH OF REST.

BEING SOME CHAPTERS FROM A UTOPIAN ROMANCE.

CHAP. XVII. (continued).—HOW THE CHANGE CAME.

"WHAT stood in the way of this?" said I.

"Why, of course," said he, "just that instinct for freedom aforesaid. It is true that the slave-class could not conceive the happiness of a free life. Yet they grew to understand (and very speedily too) that they were oppressed by their masters, and they assumed, you see how justly, that they could do without them, though perhaps they scarce knew how; so that it came to this, that though they could not look forward to the happiness or the peace of the freeman, they did at least look forward to the war which should bring that peace about."

"Could you tell me rather more closely what actually took place?" said I; for I thought him rather vague here.

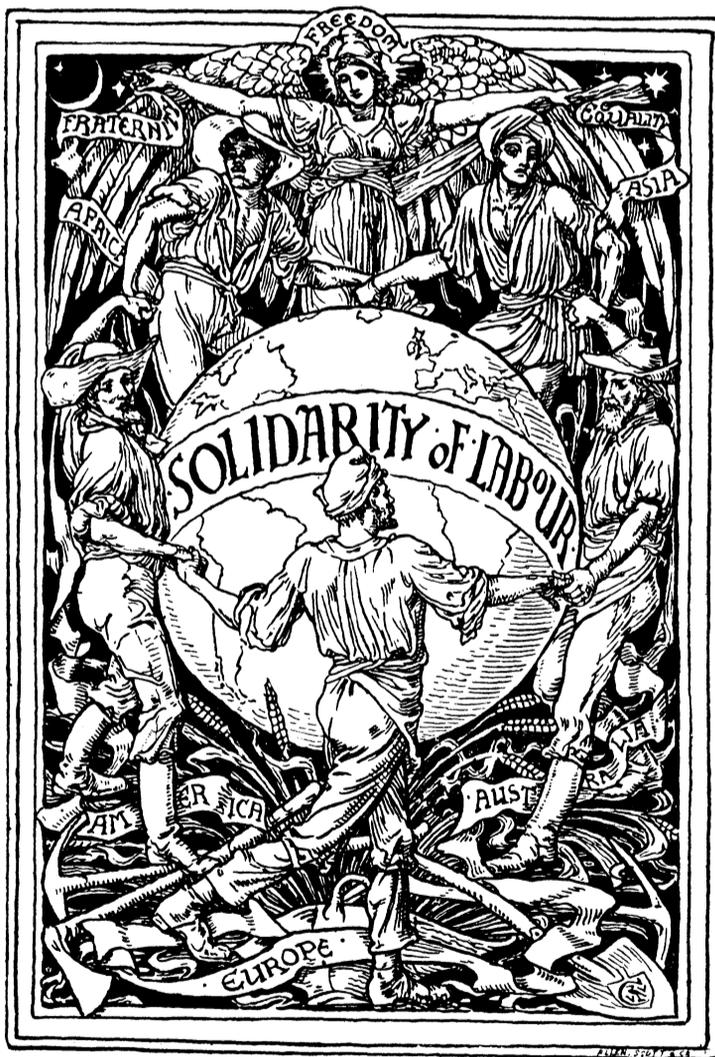
"Yes," he said, "I can. That machinery of life for the use of people who didn't know what they wanted of it, and which was known at the time as State Socialism, was partly put in motion, though in a very piecemeal way. But it did not work smoothly; it was, of course, resisted at every turn by the capitalists; and no wonder, for it tended more and more to upset the commercial system I have told you of, without providing anything really effective in its place. The result was growing confusion, great suffering amongst the working classes, and, as a consequence, great discontent. For a long time matters went on like this. The power of the upper classes had lessened as their command over wealth lessened, and they could not carry things wholly by the high hand as they had been used to in earlier days. On the other hand, the working classes were ill-organised, and growing poorer in reality, in spite of the gains (also real in the long run) which they had forced from the masters. Thus matters hung in the balance; the masters could not reduce their slaves to complete subjection, though they put down some feeble and partial riots easily enough. The workers forced their masters to grant them ameliorations, real or imaginary, of their condition, but could not force freedom from them. At last came a great crash. On some trifling occasion a great meeting was summoned by the workmen leaders to meet in Trafalgar Square (about the right to meet in which place there had for long been bickering). The civic bourgeois guard (called the police) attacked the said meeting with bludgeons, according to their custom; many people were hurt in the *mêlée*, of whom five in all died, either trampled to death on the spot, or from the effects of their cudgelling; the meeting was scattered, and some hundred of prisoners cast into gaol. A similar meeting had been treated in the same way a few days before at a place called Manchester, which has now disappeared. The whole country was

thrown into a ferment by this; meetings were held which attempted some rough organisation for the holding of another meeting to retort on the authorities. A huge crowd assembled in Trafalgar Square and the neighbourhood (then a place of crowded streets), and was too big for the bludgeon-armed police to cope with; there was a good deal of dry-blow fighting; three or four of the people were killed, and half a score of policemen were crushed to death in the throng, and the rest got away as they could. The next day all London (remember what it was in those days) was in a state of turmoil. Many of the rich fled into the country; the executive got together soldiery, but did not dare to use them; and the police could not be massed in any one place, because

riots or threats of riots were everywhere. But in Manchester, where the people were not so courageous or not so desperate as in London, several of the popular leaders were arrested. In London a convention of leaders was got together, and sat under the old revolutionary name of the Committee of Public Safety; but as they had no organised body of men to direct, they attempted no aggressive measures, but only placarded the walls with somewhat vague appeals to the workmen not to allow themselves to be trampled upon. However, they called a meeting in Trafalgar Square for the day fortnight of the last-mentioned skirmish.

"Meantime the town grew no quieter, and business came pretty much to an end. The newspapers—then, as always hitherto, almost entirely in the hands of the masters—clamoured to the Government for repressive measures; the rich citizens were enrolled as an extra body of police, and armed with bludgeons like them; many of these were strong, well-fed, full-blooded young men, and had plenty of stomach for fighting; but the government did not dare to use them, and contented itself with getting full powers voted to it by the Parliament for suppressing any revolt, and bringing up more and more soldiers to London. Thus passed the week after the great meeting; almost as large a one was held on the Sunday, which went off peaceably on the whole, as no opposition to it was offered. But on the Monday the people woke up to find that they were hungry. During the last few days there had been

groups of men parading the streets asking (or, if you please, demanding) money to buy food; and what for goodwill, what for fear, the richer people gave them a good deal. The authorities of the parishes also (I haven't time to explain that phrase at present) gave willy-nilly what provisions they could to wandering people; and the Government, which had by that time established some feeble national workshops, also fed a good number of half-starved folk. But in addition to this, several bakers' shops and other provision stores had been emptied without a great deal of disturbance. So far, so good. But on the Monday in question the Committee of Public Safety, on the one hand afraid of general unorganised pillage, and on the other emboldened by the wavering conduct of the authorities, sent a deputation provided with carts and all necessary gear to clear out two or three big provision stores in the centre of the town, leaving blank



LABOUR'S MAY DAY  
DEDICATED TO THE WORKERS OF THE WORLD

papers promising to pay the price of them with the shop managers: and also in the part of the town where they were strongest they took possession of several bakers' shops and set men at work in them for the benefit of the people;—all of which was done with little or no disturbance, the police-assisting in keeping order at the sack of the stores as they would have done at a big fire.

"But at this last stroke the reactionaries were so alarmed that they were determined to force the executive into action. The newspapers next day all blazed into the fury of frightened people, and threatened the people, the government, and everybody they could think of, unless 'order were at once restored.' A deputation of leading commercial people waited on the government and told them that if they did not at once arrest the Committee of Public Safety, they themselves would gather a body of men, arm them, and fall on 'the incendiaries,' as they called them.

"They, together with a number of the newspaper editors, had a long interview with the heads of the government and two or three military men, the deftest in their art that the country could furnish. The deputation came away from that interview, says a contemporary eye-witness, smiling and satisfied, and said no more about raising an anti-popular army, but that afternoon left London with their families for their country seats or elsewhere.

"The next morning the Government proclaimed a state of siege in London,—a thing common enough amongst the absolutist governments on the Continent, but unheard-of in England in those days. They appointed the youngest and cleverest of their generals to command the proclaimed district; a man who had won a certain sort of reputation in the disgraceful wars in which the country had long engaged in from time to time. The newspapers were in ecstasies, and all the most fervent of the reactionaries now came to the front; men who in ordinary times were forced to keep their opinions to themselves or their immediate circle, but who now began to look forward to crushing once for all the Socialist, and even democratic tendencies, which, said they, had been treated with such indulgence for the last twenty years.

"But the clever general took no visible action; and yet only a few of the minor newspapers abused him; thoughtful men gathered from this that a plot was hatching. As for the Committee of Public Safety, whatever they thought of their position, they had now gone too far to draw back; and many of them, it seems, thought that the government would not act. They went on quietly organising their food supply, which was a miserable dribble when all is said; and also as a retort to the state of siege, they armed as many men as they could in the quarter where they were strongest, but did not attempt to drill or organise them, thinking, perhaps, that they could not at the best turn them into trained soldiers till they had some breathing space. The clever general, his soldiers, and the police did not meddle with all this in the least in the world; and things were quieter in London that week-end; though there were riots in many places of the provinces, which were quelled by the authorities without much trouble. The most serious of these were at Glasgow and Bristol.

WILLIAM MORRIS.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

## THE CAUSE GOES MARCHING ON.

I HAVE often met with once active Socialists who bewailed the "utter indifference of the masses to the teaching of Socialism," and I have listened with feelings of contempt as they talked of being born 200 years or so too soon. They talked of the lull in the propaganda, and believed that prosperity in trade had made all the workers uncompromising Conservatives, and that the "march of economic events" had come to a sudden standstill.

That there is a lull in one phase of the propaganda few will deny—the work in the streets is almost a thing of the past; but this is because it has done its work. The most unskilled and thoughtless artisan has now some notion of the meaning of the word Socialism. The outdoor propaganda may still be of greatest importance in many towns yet, and I hope the "little bands" will stick enthusiastically together and preach the gospel, no matter what the obstacles may be. A few years has wrought a great change in the character of the movement. It is no longer confined to two or three small societies, but in some shape or form the ideas are part and parcel of almost every literary and political club in the kingdom, and form the *raison d'être* of the new trade unionism.

The attitude of the political parties towards social problems is a sufficient indication of the way in which the wind is blowing, and serves to show the growing strength of the movement towards Socialism. We find that cute politician, Randolph Churchill, dangling an Eight Hours' Bill before the eyes of the discontented workers, while other prominent politicians are fussing about the "housing of the poor," and other measures of an equally harmless import. While the "representatives of the people" are excited—or pretending to be excited—over the Parliamentary Game, nightly debating with seeming heat the most trifling incidents and measures, beneath it all lies a consciousness of coming danger and a feeling that the first note in the class-war has been clearly sounded.

Who sees and understands more clearly than the political parties the significance of Home Rule? The Gladstonians fear it just as much as the Tories, and will seek to give the Irish people the mere semblance

of the thing. Well do they know that the Irish are alive to the economic problem, and each day of the delay is hastening the doom of landlordism and the emancipation of Labour.

In England and Scotland the attitude of the workers towards each other has undergone an almost complete change; a feeling of confidence and solidarity is now springing up, and they know—or shall I say only half know yet?—that the cause of one is the cause of all. That this feeling has not yet found expression in the programme of any great body of workers, is not to be wondered at when we consider the causes that have crystallized their apathy and indifference towards each other.

In a time of degradation and social brutality like the present, when everything around us tends only to develop the meanest part of our nature and blot out the feeling of love, is it not inspiring to know that the cry of the "Brotherhood of Man" is becoming a living faith and a potent factor in so many young lives? While the political parties are tearing each other's eyes out for place and power, and "coming to terms" with the new labour party, or concocting charges against each other in the vain hope of diverting the attention of the workers from their material salvation, all the elements of a social conflagration are slowly but surely gathering. A few years back the most hopeful of Socialists would hardly have dreamt that the doctrine of equality and fraternity would have quickly taken such firm root, and found such ready advocates in so many unexpected quarters. Today we cannot open a magazine, or even an "obscure country paper," without seeing an article on Socialism or a lively debate being conducted in a spirit of fairness. Even the church magazines are being forced to solicit articles on the subject, and find it more profitable than the dispensing of spiritual chloroform. Instead of a few energetic souls preaching to "a lamp-post and policeman, and making both laugh," we have now quite an army of propagandists in every part of the country—in press and on platform—with attentive audience and readers.

The Docker's Strike has rung the death-knell of the old trades' unionism, and its leaders will soon take their departure and be heard of no more, for their occupation like Othello's will be gone. The skilled artisan, the "aristocrat of labour" and the darling of the politicians at election times, is beginning to learn through bitter experience the insecurity of his position, and to know that the morrow may see him in the swiftly swelling ranks of unskilled labour—and thus the march of events is with us and everything is full of hope.

A short time ago who would have dreamt of the Docker's Strike? Had any one predicted it he would simply have been laughed at and called that most horrible of names—a dreamer! The steady and patient work of our comrades at the dock-yard gates has not been in vain, and they who were once the despair of the revolutionists have shown by their devotion and unselfishness that the organisation of the workers in the near future will be a much easier task than most of us thought.

The next depression in trade will soon be upon us, and what with the growing intelligence of the workers and the higher ideal of comfort they now have, the work of the League and other kindred bodies will be much simpler in teaching the divineness of discontent and the hollowness and rottenness of our civilisation. Already the workers are gazing at each other across the Continent, and although they as yet see but dimly, they look into each other's eyes with friendlier feelings and learn that race-hatreds and jealousies have been the weapons their exploiters used to keep them so long divided. Woe to all kings, emperors, and oppressors of the weak when they clasp hands!

The recent speeches of the German Emperor, and the sops he has thrown to the workers with advice and threats to hold aloof from those horrid Socialists, show the deep-rooted feeling of discontent with the present order of things, in spite of all the coercive laws of Bismarck and his once master. That the German Emperor will "dish" the Socialists by such adroit movements no one need fear; for, prop up the rotten edifice as he may, it will all come tumbling down about his ears and bury him and his class out of sight for ever.

To Socialists who are isolated, I would say they have almost as much power as a society; a good word in season has often more real influence than many an applauded speech at a meeting. It is astonishing the work that one man can do when he has the Cause at heart. With tact and discretion he could influence a whole village; and here I would say that it is not by suppressing the name Socialist and masquerading as a sort of respectable advanced Radical that he will do much. Nothing can be done or ever could be done on those terms, and the sooner he learns the fact the better it will be for himself and the Cause he is anxious to serve.

J. M. B.

Readers of *Commonweal* and sympathisers generally in Fife, Forfar, and Perth, who are disposed to do their part in pushing forward the propaganda of Socialism, are asked to communicate with R. Dempster, care of Mrs. Scott, Colenswell Cottage, Burntisland, Fife, N.B.

PROSTITUTION.—Is there morally any difference, asks the *Journal of the Knights of Labour*, between the unfortunate woman who prostitutes her body for the means of existence and the educated, intelligent man who, as lawyer, politician, or editor, prostitutes his intellectual faculties for gain? If there is any difference, is not intellectual more degrading than physical harlotry, inasmuch as the functions of the mind are higher and nobler than those of the body? If the rule of even justice were applied, many a proud and wealthy political magnate and social leader who had risen by lending all his mental powers to the promotion of rotten causes and unjust schemes of spoliation would be more loathed and shunned than the wretched woman, more sinned against than sinning, who lives on the wages of vice.

<sup>1</sup> Our comrade is somewhat mistaken here. Speaking for London at least, and I believe many places in the country, we have never had better open-air meetings than those held within the last three months.—[EDITOR.]