NEWS FROM NOWHERE:

AN EPOCH OF REST.

BEING SOME CHAPTERS FROM A UTOPIAN ROMANCE.

Chapter XVII. (continued.)—How the Change came.

"What stands 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 broke the great crash. On one trilling 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 bickerings). The civic bourgeois guard (called the police) attacked the said meeting with bludgeons, according to their custom; many people were hurt in the melee, 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 goal. 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 resort on the authorities. A huge crowd assembled in Trafalgar Square and the neighbourhood (then a place of crowded streets), and was too strong for the bludgeon-armed police to cope with; there was a good deal of dry-fight fighting; three or four of the people were killed, and half a score of policemen were crushed to death in the crowd, 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.

"Meanwhile 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, 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. This 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 good-will, 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 at provisions they could to wandering people; and the Government, which had by that time established some whole 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
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 printers were keeping order at the back 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 they had once more to pray the Committee of Public Safety, they themselves would gather a body of men, arm them, and fall on "the incendiaries," as they called them.

The next step, with a number of the newspaper editors, had a long interview with the heads of the government and two or three military men, the dearest in their art that the country could furnish. The disputants, and one of them that I remember, says a couple of words: "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.

On the next morning the Government proclaimed a state of siege in the London,—a thing common enough amongst the absolutist governments on the Continent, but unheard of in England in those days. They appointed the young and cleverest of their generals to command the proclaimed district; a man who had won a certain sort of reputation in the disgraceful war in which the country had long engaged in from time to time. The newspapers were in ecstasy, and all the most fervent of the reactionaries were at once without a moment's delay, and turned out to keep their opinions to themselves or their immediate circle, but who now began to look forward to crushing once for all the Socialists, 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 him an idea of the state of the country, and the nature of the 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 supplies, which is a sensible thing to do in a state of siege, also as a return to the state of siege, they armed as men as they could in the quarter where they were strong, but did not attempt to drill or organise any body of them. And perhaps, they thought not; but they turned them into trained soldiers till they had some breathing space.

The clever general, his soldiers, and the police did not meddle with this in the least in the world; and things were quieter in London that week after the workers got in places in the provinces, which were quelled by the authorities without much trouble. The most serious of these were at Glasgow and Bristol.

WILLIAM MORRIS

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 full in the propaganda, and believe that the Socialists have missed their opportunity. The old Conservative speakers, and the "march of events" have come to a sudden standstill.

But that there is a dull in one phase of the propaganda law will do 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 pandemonium may still be of the greatest in some 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, and if we can define two or three small bands, 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'etre of their trade union meetings.

The conduct of the political parties towards social problems is a sufficient indication of the way in which the改良 is blowing, and serves to show the growing strength of the movement towards Socialism. The Workmen's Reform League had now collected a considerable force, and when the 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 Working Men's Association, excited over the Parliamentary Game, nightly debating with seem most thrilling incidents and measures, beneath it all lies a feeling of the working class that the first note in the class-war has been clearly sounded.

Who sees and understands more clearly than the political parties the signification of House Rule? The Gladstonians fear it just as much as the Tories, and will seek to give the Irish people the mere semblance of peace in the country, we have never had better open-air meetings than those held within the last three months. [Ednor.]

Readers of Commonweal and sympathisers generally in Fife, Forfar, and Perth are desirous to let the people of Fife, Forfar, and Perth, and, in fact, of the whole of Scotland, be informed that the leaders of the cause of Socialism, are asked to communicate with R. Dempster, care of Mrs. Scott, Colewell Cottage, Burntisland, Fife, N.B.

1 Our camcorder is somewhat mistaken here. Speaking for London at least, and believe the work in the streets is almost a thing of the past; but this is because it has done its work.