NEWS FROM NOWHERE: OR, AN EPOCH OF REST.

BEING SOME CHAPTERS FROM A UTOPIAN ROMANCE.

CHAP. XV.—ON THE LACK OF INCENTIVE TO LABOUR IN A COMMUNIST SOCIETY.

"Yes," said I, "I was expecting Dick and Clara to make their appearance any moment; there is time to ask just one or two questions before they come?"

"Try it, dear neighbour—try it," said old Hammond. "For the more you ask me the better I am pleased; and at any rate the idle come to an end. In the absence of an answer, they must sit quiet and pretend to listen till I come to an end. It won't harm them; they will find it quite amusing enough to sit by side, conscious of their position.

I smiled, as I was bound to, and said: "Good! I will go on talking without noticing them when they come in. Now, this is what I want to ask you about—to wit, how you get people to work when there is no reward of labour, and especially how you get them to work strenuously?"

"No reward of labour!" said Hammond, gravely. "The reward of labour is life. Is that not enough?"

"But no reward for specially good work," quoted I. "Plenty of reward," said he—"the reward of creation. The wages which God gets, as people might have said time ago. If you are going to ask to be paid for the pleasure of creation, which is what excellence in work means, the next thing we shall hear of will be a bill sent in for the begetting of children.

"Suppose the case of the nineteenth century would say there is a natural desire towards the procreation of children, and a natural desire not to work."

"Yes, yes," said he, "I know the ancient platitude—wholly untrue; indeed, untruth quite meaningless. Fourier, whom all men laughed at, understood the matter better.

"Why is it meaningless to you?" said I.

Hammond said that work is suffering, and we are so far from thinking that, that, as you may have noticed, whereas we are not short of wealth, there is a kind of fear growing up amongst us that we shall one day be short of work. It is a pleasure which we are afraid of losing, not a passion.

"Yes," said I, "I have noticed that, and I was going to ask you about that also. But in the meantime, what do you positively mean to say as to a possibility of the things you have said being brought about?"

"This, that all work is now pleasurable; either because of the hope of gain in honour and wealth with which the work is done, which causes pleasurable excitement, even though the actual work is not pleasant; or else because it has grown into a pleasurable habit, as in the case with what you may call mechanical work; and lastly (and most of our work is of this kind) because there is consciousness sensuous pleasure in the work itself; it is done, that is by artists.

"I see," I said. "Can you now tell me how you have come to this happy condition? For, to speak plainly, this change from the conditions of the older world seems to me far greater and more important than all the other changes you have told me about to crime, politics, property, marriage."

"You are right there," said he. "Indeed, you may say rather that it is because people see the others the others possible. What is the object of Revolution? Surely to make people happy. Revolution having brought its foredoomed change about, how can you prevent the counter-revolution from setting in except by making people happy? What shall we expect peace and stability from unhappiness? The gathering of grapes from thorns and figs from thistles is a reasonable expectation compared with that! And happiness without happy work is the least.

"Most obviously true," said I: for I thought the old boy was preaching a little. "But answer my question, as to how you gained this happiness."

"Briefly," he said, "by the absence of artificial coercion, and the freedom for every man to do what he can do best, joined to the knowledge of what productions of labour we really wanted. I must admit that this knowledge we reached slowly and painfully."

"Go into more detail; explain more fully. For this subject interests me intensely."

"Yes, I will," said he; "but in order to do so I must weary you by talking a little about the past. Contrast is necessary for this explanation. Do you mind it?"

"No, no," said I.

"Yes, no," said he, setting himself in his chair again for a long talk: "It is clear that what we read, that what is known, that in the last age of civilisation men had got into a vicious circle in the matter of production of works. They had reached a wonderful facility of production, and in order to make use of what they had gradually created (or allowed to grow, rather) a most elaborate system of buying and selling, which has been called the World Market; and that world-market, once set going, forced them to go on making more and more of these works, which, however, they did not use. Not, of course, that they could not free themselves from the toil of making real necessaries, they created in a never-ending series sham or artificial necessaries, which became, under the iron rule of the aforesaid world-market, of equal importance to them with the real necessaries which supported life. By all this they burdened themselves with a prodigious mass of work merely for the sake of keeping their wretched system going.

"Yes," and the old one said I.

"Why, then, since they had forced themselves to stagger along under this horrible burden of unnecessary production, it became impossible for them to look upon labour and its results from any other point of view than one—viz., in the ceaseless and incessant toil of producing an impossible amount of labour on any article made, and yet at the same time to make as many articles as possible. To this 'cheaping of production,' as it was called, everything was sacrificed: the happiness of workmen, his right to work; his natural diet; his health; his personal cleanliness; his family; his education; his dwelling house, his leisure, his amusements, his life; in short—did not weigh a grain of sand compared how the balance was upset. It was not doing the right things, a great part of which were not worth producing at all. Nay, we are told, and we must believe it, so overwhelming is the evidence, though many of our people scarcely can believe it, that even rich and poor, the immense majority of the working classes, were living amidst sights and sounds and smells which it is in the very nature of man to abhor and flee from, in order that their riches might bolster up the ruling classes.

"The coming of the raving, monster, 'the cheap production' forced upon it by the world-market."

"Dear me!" said I. "But what happened? Did not their cleverness and facility in production master this chaos of misery at last? Couldn't they catch up with the world-market, and then set to work to devise means for relieving themselves from this fearful task of extra labour?"

He smiled bitterly. "Did they even try to!" he said. "I am not sure. You know that according to the old saw the beetle gets used to living in dung; and these people, whether they found the dung sweet or not certainly did not give up the work.

"His estimate of the life of the nineteenth century made me catch my breath a little; and I said feebly, 'But the labour-saving machines!'"

"Heyday!" quoth he. "What's that you are saying! the labour-saving machines? Yes, they were made to 'save labour' (or, to speak more plainly, the lives of men) on one piece of work in order that they might be used to make another piece of work. Friend, all their devices for cheapening labour simply resulted in increasing the burden of labour. The appetite of the world-market grew with what it fed on: the countries within the ring of the 'cheap production' was called 'civilisation' (that is, organised misery) were glutted with the abstractions of the market, and force and fraud were used unsurprisingly to 'open up' countries outside that pale. This process of over-satiation of the men was the true cause of the misery of the men of that period and do not understand their practice; and perhaps shows us at its worst the great vice of the nineteenth century, the use of hypocrisy and cant to realise the despotic power of the rich man.

"The civilised world-market coveted a country not yet in its clutches, some transparent pretext was found—the suppression of a slavery different from and not so cruel as that of commerce; the pushing of a religion no longer believed in by its promoters; the 'rescue' of some desperado or homicidal madman whose misdeeds had got him into trouble amongst the natives of the 'barbarous' country—any stick, in short which would beat the dog at all; for the intelligent, interested and enterprising toil that was forming (no difficult task in the days of competition), and he was bribed to 'create a market' by breaking up whatever traditional society there might be in the doomed land, by shortening the wages and increasing the hours. He forced wages on the natives which they did not want, and took their natural products in 'exchange,' as this form of robbery was called, and thereby he 'created new wants,' to supply which (that is, to be allowed to live by their new masters) the humble people had to sell themselves into the slavery of hopeless toil so that they might have something wherewith to purchase the nullities of 'civilisation.' Ah, the old man, pointing to the Museum, "I have read books and papers in there, telling strange stories indeed of the dealings of civilisation (or organised misery) with non-civilisation; from the time when the British Government deliberately sent blankets infected with small-pox as choice gifts to the savages, and it is said to this day, to the time when Africa was infested by a man named Stanley, who—"

"Excuse me," said I; "but as you know, time presses; and I want to touch quickly on the subject and to come at once to ask this about these works made for the world-market—how about their quality? These people who were so clever about making goods, I suppose they made them well?"

"Quality!" said the old man, facetiously; for he was rather peevish at being cut short in his story; "how could they possibly attend to such trifles as the quality of the wares they sold! The best of them were a wretched average of the worst possible. The man who asked for which nobody would have put up with if they could have got anything else. It was a current jest of the time that the wares were made to sell and not to use; a jest which you, as coming from the best, best, you could not possibly understand, because you are an English voter."

"I said: "What did they make nothing well?"

"Why, yes," said he, "there was one class of goods which they made thoroughly well, and that was the guns. These were usually quite perfect pieces of workmanship, admirably adapted to the end in view. So that it may be fairly said that the great achievement of the nineteenth century was the making of machines which were wonders of invention, skill, and patience, and which were used for the production of
quantities of worthless make-shifts. In truth, the owners of the machines did not consider anything which they made as wares, but simply as means for the enrichment of themselves. Of course, the only admitted method of utilizing the machinery was the finding of buyers for them, and if one of these failed, something might happen.

"And people put up with this!" said I.

"For a time," said he.

"And then the overturn," said the old man, smiling, "and the nineteenth century saw itself as a man who had lost his clothes whilst bathing and had to walk naked through the town."

WILLIAM MORRIS.

[To be continued.]