

Wimbledon and Merton Notes

(The Jubilee)

Frank Kitz

July 9th, 1887

We have survived the Jubilee here. The local toadies got up their jubilation in secret, for fear that after what took place at the Drill Hall the dreaded Socialists would mar their plans. The Mitcham celebrators provided a tough dinner to persons over 68, mostly toothless; and their Merton congeners expressed their thankfulness to the Queen for being born by taking an extra dose of preaching and letting off some squibs. We Socialists enlivened Uie enforced tedium of the day by inundating the neighbourhood with Socialist leaflets. In this wise we met a procession of schoolboys on jubilee parade, and before their teachers were aware of our purpose we had given to every lad a leaflet "Give them uo," shouted the irate pedagogue, when he discovered the nature of the bills, "or I will stop all your medals." These said medals being a bit of tin impressed with the puffy features of Victoria. But the boys refused, and risked their medals. With insinuating manners and, I grieve to say, false speech on our tongue as to the real nature of the "goods" we were disposing of — such as "Take a tract, mum," etc — we "worked" — to use the expressive but inelegant language of one of our colporteurs — a quantity of leaflets into hands that would otherwise have refused them. Their disgust and horror when they discovered their mistake was laughable, but they nevertheless kept the bills and read them, and so we were rewarded.

Some curious instances occur in the course of this propagandist work, and are, I think, worth noting here. When alone on tram or railway journeys, I take the opportunity of placing the leaflets with which I am always provided on seats of waiting-rooms and vehicles, or where a workman's face is an index of its owner's receptivity, a leaflet is bestowed with a casual remark. "Hm," said a weary-looking young railway servant to me on giving him a bill, "that's what we want in this country, is Socialism." "So," I ventured to rejoin, "you are not afraid of the Socialists?" "Why should I be?" said he; "all my waking hours are spent in watching and working, and I have to submit to tyranny of officials and the insults of these sort of passengers," pointing to a trainload of city men and some members of the "demi monde" intermixed. "Do you think them a useful class?" said I. "I don't know," he answered; "any road, they take it easy — ten till four — and some don't look as if they troubled much." "It is possible," said I, "that they in their shareholding and stockjobbing way are living upon and causing the overwork of you railway men, and under Socialism you would be men, instead of a source solely of profit to those who despise you." "Hear," he said, "and the sooner they are swept away the better." I may supplement the railwayservant's observation by saying that the manners of these hucksters and quill-drivers towards working

men in the trains is insufferably contemptuous. It is an interesting sight, and one that is a strange commentary upon the statement that there is no class antagonism except what is stirred up by the Socialist, to see these popinjays and their bedizened upstart women shrink from possible contact or speech with the tired workmen who may chance into the same carriages when they are on the way to and fro their city "operations" and their paltry villas. Snobbery is contagious, and every wretched overworked clerk or shopman imitates it, instead of fraternising with their fellow-workers, the artisan and labourer.

Before entering my train I gave a Jubilee bill to a burly engineer. After reading a few lines only, he said: "Whoever wrote that ought to be locked up." Being the writer a guilty feeling overcame me. I took stock of him. "Here is an amiable specimen," thought I; "whoever writes what this man disagrees with must be imprisoned. What a fossil!" He probably ekes out his wages with the miserable profits of a chandlers' shop, and because he is satisfied in the sense that donkeys are when oats abound, no one else must protest. It is these curmudgeons who comprise what it pleases the scribes of the press to style the bulwark of divinely ordered society. England might wash her hands in the blood of all nations, and tramps and paupers increase, but he has got work, continued work, and with work he is satisfied. "Briton's never shall be slaves."

Leaving this "survival by fitness" I entered the train, into which I had already thrown my leaflets. Presently a number of workmen entered and the train started. The leaflets caught their eye and they speedily read them. Said an elderly man: "It's all very fine for them 'ere Socialists to talk, and what they say is right, but it will never come about. It always was so, rich and poor. We must have a head, and if we was to share out to-morrow we should all be back again next week worse off than before; them 'ere lazy chaps as won't work would collar the lot." I looked fixedly out of the window while a fierce controversy raged betwixt the speaker and the younger men, who, by the way, although they showed the glaring illogic of what is called common sense, in their converse yet were sympathetic to the new idea. I now mildly joined in, saying that I knew something about those Socialists, and had even been in the company of one that very day, who had been my personal acquaintance since he was a child. I asked the first speaker if he had ever heard or read of a Socialist who advocated the sharing out principle, and if he further didn't think that the idle and dissolute had already "collared the lot." Perhaps I diffidently suggested the Socialist might want the mines whence comes the fuel that warms, and the fields where grows the produce that feeds mankind, so as to be the property of the miners and peasants who worked them, instead of the property of the Lonsdales and Fitzwilliams, who neither delve nor dig, but live upon the sweat of other's bodies. If rich and poor, moreover, were as he alleged always to be, did he think it right that the rich should be those who didn't work or produce, and the poor the producers of the riches. The way of the world, I humbly remarked, was a little changed, for the vehicle we were riding in proved it, and would it not be better for the mass of the people to be educated physically and mentally into self-governing men and women than to cling to the selfish slavish idea that there must always be a head, and that head perchance belonging to a rogue or idiot made, in short, of the same material that British hearts are alleged to be made of, viz., tough timber? I asked him, in conclusion, whether he was assured of ending his days free from want, and he sorrowfully shook his head, but he added, "You'll never alter it" The younger men combated this notion, and I made an earnest appeal to them to work in the cause of labour emancipation, and as they left the train they cordially wished me "Good-speed!" and promised me help, and so ended another effort in the favour of the Cause.

In a public-house, where the same cause led to a heated debate, one vituperative antagonist said triumphantly, "Is not the landlord worthy his hire?" but when I asked what reward the landlord of rack-rented fever dens was justly entitled to, deponent said nothing.

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