

The Struggle for Freedom [Oct, 1886]

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THE spirit of revolt has been the saving grace of humanity. The whole story of our race is full of the resistance of the mass of mankind (always from the earliest dawn of our knowledge, more or less consciously social animals)-to the anti-social spirit of domination of certain individuals, the strongest, subtlest, and least scrupulous of the community. Without such resistance to the authority usurped by man over man, human Society must have withered away, and human beings become as unsocial as hawks and tigers. That fate has been spared us. On the contrary, the struggle for freedom has continually increased in volume and in intensity. The blind instinct which seems to have prompted its earlier manifestations is slowly passing into a conscious purpose. It has spread into every department of life, and the victories it has won are seen to be but the earnest of those which lie before it.

To those who with sympathetic eyes watch this spirit of revolt seething beneath the thin gloss of our so-called civilisation, the struggle for freedom appears at the present time to fall into three broad currents of tendency. Firstly, the efforts of individuals to assert their human dignity by the social claim to free initiative in thought, word, and deed. Secondly, the attempts of subject races to throw off alien overlordship, and make good their claim to free autonomy and self-organization. Thirdly, the growing determination of the great masses of the people to free themselves from the rule of their masters, and claim the right to choose and direct their own labor, and to enjoy its fruits. The spirit of these three tendencies is one and the same, its manifestations differ with the diversity of conditions. For the camp of the rebels is as wide as the world, and each land, each community, each individual has special necessities, and alone can judge of them. Strikes, boycotts, riots, workmen's conferences, national and international trades' unionism, Irish outrages; the tithe-war in Wales, and the resistance of Highland crofters to the greed of the land-thieves - outbreaks of prisoners in French jails, and of peasants in Russia; the bomb of Chicago Anarchists, and the free-speech contest of English Socialists; newspaper remonstrances with the injustice of the law and its administration and the passive resistance of the Leicester anti-vaccinators; the abstention from the voting urn of French workmen and the return of political prisoners as members of Parliament by the people of Italy,-these and all such actions of protests against authority, are evidence of the living spirit of revolt abroad in Society, and I as such we welcome them. They are clearing the way towards a fuller and more brotherly social life; sometimes roughly, indeed, but the path is rough and choked with rubbish, and the necessity is cruel.

We propose, therefore, to devote a portion of our space to a few illustrative instances of such passing phases of the great revolt as fall beneath our notice, and of the social conditions which are its proximate cause. And we do so in the belief that from a consideration of the wrongs and the courage, the failures and the triumphs of our brethren throughout the world we may, each and all, derive inspiration, warning, and encouragement, and learn to feel that each petty action, each effort apparently isolated and fruitless, is in reality part of the universal war against oppression in all its forms, in which, consciously or unconsciously, we must all take our share, and fight for human freedom or against it.

GREAT BRITAIN

One of the most interesting present phases of the great revolt is the agitation of the Keltic populations, if not for free land, at least for land less heavily burdened for the maintenance of their

Teutonic masters. Foreign competition has reduced the value of agricultural produce by something like half. But the non-producing classes, i. e., proprietors and clergy, and farmers in localities where these have been bitten by the idea of degrading themselves from workers into gentlemen, are struggling to wring the same unearned benefit from the toil of the laborers as before. Among the Keltic peoples this attempt to extort the uttermost farthing is aggravated by antagonism of race, by the tradition of conqueror and conquered, by the imposition of an alien law. The tithe war in Wales is a current example. These tithes are an arbitrary charge upon the rent of the land, varying from 6d. to 10s. 4d. an acre. They are reckoned by the average price of corn, whereas Welsh land is mostly pasture, and stock has been depreciated .30 per cent. during the last two years. Grievance number one. They are paid to support the Welsh clergy of the alien Church of England, to which religious body only 300,000 out of a population of 1,500,000 belong. Grievance number two. In view of the bad times the landlords have accepted a reduction of rent, but the majority of the clergy have refused to follow suit. Grievance number three. The farmers, 400 or 500 of them, have resolved to be sold up rather than pay, and on the 7th September at Ruthin fair they formed a North Wales Anti-Tithe League. They have the people with them, miners and farm laborers alike. Indignant crowds have attended the forced cattle sales, and only been prevented beating and ducking the bailiffs and auctioneer by bodies of 80 or 90 policemen. One obnoxious parson has to be guarded to church on Each side, and many others have been frightened into offering a reduction. The agitation, partial and narrow as are its present objects, is a valuable practical lesson to the Welsh people in the art of ridding themselves of land leeches.

FRANCE

The last few weeks have afforded some good illustrations of three aspects assumed by the spirit of revolt in our times. First, we have the outbreak of sheer despair. The determination to try the unknown since the known was unbearable, of the child prisoners, the wretched little vine-dressers of Porquerolles, and their grown-up companions in misfortune, the convicts at Rheims and La Roquette. Secondly, the strikes, common protests of bands of workers against the miserable fraction of the produce of their labor which their masters dole out to them. There are strikes against reduction of wages among those of St. Quentin, the corset makers of Paris, the cabinet makers of Lyons, the miners of Ronchamps, and many others, but the most interesting is that of the agricultural plant makers at Vierzon. Their wages have been reduced 54 per cent. in the last seven years. The masters (a company with neither body to kick nor soul to damn) have called in two companies of soldiers and a whole posse of police to force the men to accept their terms. In vain. The whole town is with the workmen; the soldiers hate their task and fraternize with the strikers; the strike is being supported by public subscriptions, and the company can induce no black-legs to work for them. 'Success to the workers who stand by one another in this struggle ! But it is a pity, is it not, to spend so much pluck and energy on a contest for a mere shilling or two more per week to lay out in maintaining a slaves existence?

There is a third noticeable fact in France; the conscious, active protest against social arrangements which cause so much misery, on the part of those who have learned to realize wherein lies the root of their distress. Our comrades at Lyons have just succeeded in re-issuing a newspaper (La Lutte Sociale), despite the arrest of its manager Bordat, the ex-prisoner of Clairvaux. They have used the recent elections to the conseils generaux to point out to their fellow-workmen

the folly of voting and the number of abstentions has been remarkable. At Lille, a fresh group to spread the ideas of revolutionary Socialism has just been organized. The attentive crowds at Socialist lectures, especially Louise Michel's have so alarmed the authorities, that they have sent her to prison for six months. Her previous imprisonments have made her so popular, explained the Public Prosecutor !

BELGIUM

Nearly three hundred working-men and women have been sentenced since last March to terms of imprisonment varying from eight days to five years, on suspicion of taking part in the spring riots. On suspicion merely, for in the majority of cases the charge was unsubstantiated. The more active and energetic insurgents got from ten to twenty years of hard labor. Yet what have these men done but take the only effectual means in their power to bring to light, and to end a life for themselves and their fellows, which the official report truly describes as "a circle of Hell"? Terrified by their outbreak, the middle-class have at last troubled to inquire what kind of existence is led by the men and women who labor to bring them wealth. No wonder Belgian coal and iron masters make large fortunes, and Belgian iron undersells English, when Belgian miners are paid at the outside £2 10s. a month, and the minimum sum (according to the Liege Commission of Inquiry) upon which a family can exist is £4 3s. 4d., when young girls are working from 14 to 17 hours a day for Is. 7 d., some standing knee deep in water. The men who revolt against such conditions deserve the thanks of humanity; but the editor of the Vooruit has been imprisoned. for six months for merely suggesting to soldier's wives to beg their husbands not to fire upon the rebel victims of greed. Now, however, the fury of the ruling classes has had time to cool, and they have become more politic in their fear. They are trying the old dodge, which has been so successful in fooling the workers in England and elsewhere, the blind which during this century has been the main obstacle to an economic revolution. Agitate for political rights, there lies the way of salvation, they say to the starving worker, when his common sense leads him to lay hands on the implements of labor and the wealth he has created. And thus they secure a little longer their luxuries and their power. So the Government provides cheap trains for the demonstrators in favor of universal suffrage, whilst the democratic leaders are thanking the police for their courtesy, and all goes merry as a marriage bell. But what of bread and a decent home for the workers? Across the frontier, where every Frenchman has a vote, are they more free or less miserable?

AMERICA

The United States can boast the possession of republican institutions, manhood Suffrage, trial by jury, police and military nominally servants of the People's will, all the program of political liberty in fact. Nevertheless there is no country in the world where the toiling masses are met by more arbitrary and brutal ferocity when they show any decided intention to free themselves from the control of the possessors of wealth. Take the current year, during which the workers have made a push for closer union, higher wages and the eight hours' day. In all cases they have begun by peaceful resistance to their master's tyranny. How have they been met? In spring, firing upon unionists on strike and wholesale evictions of strikers' families. All through the

summer, severe sentences upon working-class boycotting, though employers are permitted to boycott unionists at their pleasure. Finally, in August, seven men condemned to death, simply because they hold and proclaim the duty of every honest man to resist oppression by every means in his power. A bomb has been flung, by some person unknown, among the police preparing to charge a peaceable meeting at Chicago; they shoot and beat town (the people, men, women and children, as they had done the day before). The property owners are terrified at the energy of the protest against their authority, and clamor for some vengeance which may strike terror into the rebels. Hence the mock trial of the eight Anarchists before a packed jury and prejudiced judge, and their condemnation to death in defiance of the evidence. It is by proceedings such as these that the ruling classes are aiding the emancipation of the enslaved from the superstitious reverence for authority. And in this knowledge our brave comrades go gladly to meet their fate.

ITALY

In spite of their hard won "political liberty," the Italian people are falling a prey to the grinding slavery of the capitalist system, and especially to its most pitiless form, the commercial company. They protest against this oppression by a succession of strikes for higher wages or shorter hours, and there is a rapid increase of Socialistic feeling among the workers, met by the rulers by the most arbitrary measures of repression. Expression of opinion is a crime; men are kept in prison for months without trial, or transported to the pleasure of the police. The Workmen's Party, a Moderate Socialist organization which attempted to keep strenuously within the law, has lately been dissolved. This fate is common to all workmen's associations which do not lead themselves to party leaders for their own political purposes. Anarchists, who refuse to be bought or silenced, and who attempt to unite the workers in the struggle for economic freedom, are continually arrested, and their trials, following one another in rapid succession, are excellent means of spreading their ideas. The effect is seen in their invariable acquittal when the Government have ventured to bring them before a jury instead of hired magistrates, and in the honorary election and reelection of the condemned as members of the Italian Parliament.

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