

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST PROPAGANDA

I "All for the Cause"

MORRIS was one of the very first of the pioneers, one of the first of the founders of the modern Socialist movement "It must be understood that I always intended to join any body who distinctly called themselves Socialists", he wrote to Andreas Scheu in September, 1883,

"so when last year I was invited to join the Democratic Federation by Mr Hyndman, I accepted the invitation hoping that it would declare for Socialism, in spite of certain drawbacks that I expected to find in it; concerning which I find on the whole that there are fewer drawbacks than I expected"¹

When he took out membership of the Federation in January, 1883, an attempt was still being made to build it on the lines of an alliance of Radical Clubs. The adoption in the summer of 1883, of the pamphlet, *Socialism Made Plain*, resulted in the withdrawal by some of the Radicals of their support. At the same time, a new Executive was elected which included firm Socialists like J. L. Joynes and H. H. Champion, Andreas Scheu, James Macdonald, and William Morris as Treasurer. Belfort Bax was brought on to the Executive in the autumn, and in January, 1884, *Justice*, the organ of the Federation, was first launched. During 1884 the sale of this paper, open-air propaganda, a public debate between Charles Bradlaugh and Hyndman, lecturing tours by Morris—all these began to draw public attention to the existence of a Socialist movement in Britain, and brought the formation of a few provincial branches. In the last week of December, 1884, when the propaganda seemed at last to be well under way, the Executive of the S.D.F. split in two and Morris, with the majority, resigned to form the Socialist League. In less than two years Morris had become one of the two or three acknowledged leaders of the Socialist movement in England.

¹ *Letters*, p. 188

This result was as unexpected to Morris as it was to his new comrades. Of course, the pioneers were aware that they had won a notable convert. "Morris", Hyndman recalled, in a generous tribute on his death, "with his great reputation and high character, doubled our strength at a stroke, by giving in his adhesion."¹ "It was a curious situation for Morris", George Bernard Shaw—who had heard him discuss the matter—recalled

"He had escaped middle age, passing quite suddenly from a circle of artistic revolutionists, mostly university men gone Agnostic or Bohemian or both, who knew all about him and saw him as much younger and less important than he really was, into a proletarian movement in which, so far as he was known at all, he was venerated as an Elder. Once or twice some tactless ghost from his past wandered into the Socialist world and spoke of him and even to him as Topsy. It was soon morally booted out in miserable bewilderment for being silly and impudent."²

Some of the pioneers (if Bruce Glasier's recollections can be trusted) regarded Morris with an awe which was near to being sickly. To them he seemed like a figure in romance, coming from—

"the wonderful world of poetry and art in which he and his companions, Rossetti, Burne-Jones, and Swinburne, lived their Arcadian lives, and from which, like a prince in a fairy story, he appeared to be stepping down chivalrously into the dreary region of working-class agitation."³

"The small minority of us who had any contacts with the newest fashions in literature and art", Shaw recalled,

"knew that he had become famous as the author of *The Earthly Paradise* which few of us had read, though that magic line 'the idle singer of an empty day' had caught our ears somehow. We knew that he kept a highly select shop in Oxford Street where he sold furniture of a rum aesthetic sort, and decorated houses with extraordinary wall-papers. And that was about all."⁴

In however much respect Morris might be held, it did not follow that he would assume a position of political leadership in the movement. Most organizations have notabilities who lend

¹ *Justice*, October 6th, 1896

² May Morris, II, p. xi

³ John Bruce Glasier, *William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement* (1921), p. 20

⁴ May Morris, II, p. xiii

the authority of their names to the movement who occasionally chair a meeting, deliver an address, or sit on the platform at an annual meeting Morris must have seemed well suited to this role As Treasurer his known integrity and his own deep pocket would be invaluable As a poet and artist of national reputation, he would be able to give supporting fire on the middle-class flank of the movement For a man who was notoriously busy, this was all that could be expected

In fact, on joining the Federation, Morris told Hyndman that he was ready to do whatever work lay to hand, as a rank-and-filer under Hyndman's lead Hyndman had accepted this offer of allegiance with serene self-confidence, while the young Shaw in the background smiled grimly to himself, "measuring at sight how much heavier Morris's armament was"¹ But neither of them understood the full implications of these simple words

Morris was not a man given to polite turns of phrase or to rhetoric All his life it had been his business to *make* things Whether tiles or tapestry or paper, no detail was too trivial to catch his attention Now that he had decided that it was necessary to make a revolution, he set about the business in the same manner First, it was necessary to find out through study and experience *how* a revolution was made Next, it was necessary to get down to the details of making it, "turning neither to the right hand nor to the left hand till it was done" Questions of his own comfort or dignity were irrelevant When he sold *Justice* in the streets or spoke at open-air meetings, he did not do it as a romantic gesture, or because he liked doing it but simply because it had to be done, and, provided that he could do the job, he saw no reason why he should be excused

But Morris's words had deeper implications even than this, and of a kind which Hyndman—and certainly Shaw—were never fitted to understand Morris brought to the movement all the enthusiasm of the convert whose whole life had served as a preparation for conversion but he also brought something which the youthful convert or individualist in revolt can only learn through experience—an understanding of the subordination of individual differences of outlook and temperament essential to the growth of the Cause. Morris's vision of the discipline and organization

¹ May Morris, II, p. xiii.

necessary if the propaganda of Socialism was to take effective form was clearer than that of any of the earliest pioneers. It was a theme of his first Socialist poems

"There amidst the world new-built shall our earthly deeds abide,
Though our names be all forgotten, and the tale of how we died

"Life or death then, who shall heed it, what we gain or what we lose"
Fair flies life amid the struggle, and the Cause for each shall choose"

It was a repeated theme of his first lectures. "By union I mean a very serious matter", he said in a lecture of 1883.

"I mean sacrifice to the Cause of leisure, pleasure and money, each according to his means. I mean sacrifice of individual whims and vanity, of individual misgivings, even though they may be founded on reason, as to the means which the organizing body may be forced to use. remember without organization the cause is but a vague dream, which may lead to revolt, to violence and disorder, but which will be speedily repressed by those who are blindly interested in sustaining the present anarchical tyranny which is misnamed Society. remember also that no organization is possible without the sacrifices I have been speaking of, without obedience to the necessities of the Cause."¹

This vision of the Cause was Morris's special, and his most permanent, contribution to the British Socialist movement, and it was, in part, his growing conviction that such self-sacrificing organization could never be built up under Hyndman's autocratic leadership, that forced him into prominence, and precipitated the split in December, 1884.

II Tutors in Socialism

Although, in 1883, there were foreshadowings of this future conflict, they were of little importance. Morris at the outset attached himself to the most active propagandists within the councils of the Federation. After one of the first meetings which he attended, he wrote that one of the members "spoke hugely to my liking, advocated street-preaching as the real practical method wisely to my mind."² This mood grew within him as the year grew older. In a lecture of this year he asked, "How is the change to be brought about?"

¹ "Art and the People", May Morris, II, pp. 404-5 ² Mackail, II, p. 97

"No noise of people puffing themselves will do it, no mere electioneering dodges, no mere clattering of fine phrases amongst those who perfectly well agree with each other, it must come from the hearts of men who are resolved on it

"I say it is the plain duty of those who believe in the necessity of social revolution, quite irrespectively of any date they may give to the event, first to express their own discontent and hope when and where they can, striving to impress it on others, secondly to learn from books and from living people who are willing to teach them, in as much detail as possible what are the ends and the hopes of Social Revolution, and thirdly to join any body of men which is honestly striving to give means of expression to that discontent and hope, and to teach people the details of the aim of Constructive Revolution ."¹

In February and March he was busy with the second duty. The literature of Socialism in English was ridiculously small. Not even the *Communist Manifesto* was in print. The only work of scientific Socialism which Morris could obtain without difficulty was the French edition of *Capital* and the effect of his study of it is obvious in all his writing—the sudden understanding of the central fact of class struggle, the sharpening of all his historical analysis. At the same time he was reading works of Robert Owen, whom "he praised . . . immensely",² and, in September, 1883, he was again reading books by Cobbett "such queer things they are, but with plenty of stuff in them".³ In August, 1884, when it had become clear to him that he might be forced to challenge the leadership of Hyndman, he wrote in anxiety to Andreas Scheu

"I feel myself weak as to the Science of Socialism on many points, I wish I knew German, as I see I must certainly learn it. Confound you chaps! What do you mean by being foreigners?"⁴

and enquired for the name of some German comrade who could read the classics of Socialism with him in English.

Study (he had said) must come not only from books, but also from "living people." "I have just been reading *Underground Russia*", he wrote to his daughter Jenny, in May, 1883 "It is a most interesting book, though terrible reading too."⁵ Its author, Sergius Stepniak, became one of the refugee colony in England, and Morris later came to know him well. Not only the refugees

¹ "Art and the People", May Morris, II, pp 403-4

² Mackail, II, p 97

³ *Letters*, p 183

⁴ *Ibid*, pp 211-12

⁵ *Ibid*, p 172

whom he met and conversed with in London, but also their nameless comrades, imprisoned or working illegally in Russia, Germany and Austria, came to exercise a powerful hold on his imagination "Is Socialism a dream?" he asked in a lecture of 1883, and answered

"It is no dream but a cause, men and women have died for it, not in the ancient days but in our own time they lie in prison for it, work in mines, are exiled, are ruined for it believe me when such things are suffered for dreams, the dreams come true at last"¹

Morris was soon to know many refugees Among them were Stepniak and Prince Kropotkin Frederick Lessner, who had marched with the Chartists in 1848, had returned to Germany and been imprisoned with great brutality before escaping to England once again, and Andreas Scheu who, from 1883 to 1885, was one of Morris's closest colleagues Scheu, an Austrian Socialist of the "Left", had escaped from persecution in Vienna in 1874 had later found work in Edinburgh (where he introduced the young bookbinder, Robert Banner, to the Socialist movement) and had returned to London in 1882 A tall, impressive man with a black beard, he became one of the best known of the early Socialist orators, with an impassioned and fluent delivery His character was not free from vanity but, in the 1880s, his enthusiasm was unquestionable As a furniture-designer, he was one of the few of Morris's colleagues who took an informed interest in the aims of the Firm and their acquaintance had ripened before the end of 1883 into warm friendship He was a frequent visitor to Kelmscott House at Hammersmith, translating to Morris passages from Marx and Engels and Lassalle or entertaining the family by singing arias from Mozart or Austrian folk songs and songs of the German and Austrian revolutionaries²

With the young Bax, now an earnest student of Marxism and a frequent visitor at both Engels's and Morris's houses, and with Hyndman (whom Morris was now visiting regularly on Monday evenings for political discussions) he carried forward his education in the principles of Socialism Of course, there were many

¹ "Art and the People", May Morris, II, p. 403

² Scheu, *op cit*, Part III, Ch. VI "Oh, Scheu", Morris would say on these occasions, "I don't know what I would give to be able to sing! But I can't I sing only when I declaim verse, and the moderns tell me this sing-song at the end of each line won't do"

other "living men" who helped to deepen his understanding. For example, among the nine members who inaugurated the Hammersmith Branch of the Democratic Federation in June, 1884, there was the name of E. T. Craig. Born in 1804, Craig was writing in his eightieth year a poem in memory of his friend, the Owenite propagandist, Dr. Henry Travis:

" now, when four score years have come and gone,
Alone I seem to stand, a gnarled oak,
Amidst a forest growth of fruitless trees,
The last of that small group—a social host,
Of Owen, Thompson, Morgan, Finch and Pare "1

What names to conjure with in the new Socialist movement!—a friend of Robert Owen and William Thompson and of J. Minter Morgan, the author of *The Revolt of the Bees*, one of the sweetest and least-known of the early Socialist Utopias. Craig's history seemed almost designed to serve as a symbol of the worker's struggle in the nineteenth century. As a boy in his home town, Leicester, he had seen Luddite prisoners marching in chains through the streets. As a youth he was present at Peterloo.² He promoted some of the first co-operatives in Lancashire, edited, in 1831, the *Lancashire Co-operator*, and was later one of the leaders of one of the most successful experiments in co-operative communities—at Ralahine in County Clare. On its forcible closure, he returned to England and found a living as a journalist, lecturer and co-operator. The old fighter's adhesion to the new Socialism was not only nominal: he was a frequent attender at the Hammersmith Branch in 1884 and 1885, and an infrequent attender until the end of the 1880s—a member of the first Executive of the Socialist League and an occasional platform speaker, with "a fife-like voice which sometimes recovered its old chest register in a sort of bellow that beat upon one's ear drums"³. As late as 1893 he was still to be found on the platform of the Hammersmith Clubroom, with a grey shepherd's plaid round his shoulders, and a huge ear-trumpet, with which he gestured to

¹ In *Memory of Henry Travis, M.D.* (died February 4th, 1884). J. Finch, author of *Letters on Ralahine*, William Pare, *Capital and Labour*—both prominent Owenites.

² *Memoir of E. T. Craig*. One of the first numbers of *Commonweal* included Craig's reminiscences of "Orator" Hunt.

³ May Morris, II, p. 186, Hammersmith Minutes, *passim*.

the danger of Morris and the speaker¹ His contribution to the theory of the new movement was small but his influence on Morris, in giving him the knowledge and inspiration of a long history of struggle, must have been great

III "So I Began the Business" "

The first duty of revolutionists, Morris felt at this time, was "to express their discontent and hope when and where they can" "Discontent and hope"—the words were carefully chosen Middle class in origin, comfortable in his own surroundings, his revolt against capitalism stemmed from moral revulsion rather than direct experience of poverty and oppression He put the matter in its simplest terms in a letter to C. E. Maurice

"In looking into matters social and political I have but one rule, that in thinking of the condition of any body of men I shall ask myself, 'How could you bear it yourself? what would you feel if you were poor against the system under which you live?' I have always been uneasy when I had to ask myself that question, and of late years I have had to ask it so often, that I have seldom had it out of my mind and the answer to it has more and more made me ashamed of my own position, and more and more made me feel that if I had not been born rich or well-to-do I should have found my position *unendurable* Nothing can argue me out of this feeling, which I say plainly is a matter of religion to me the contrasts of rich and poor are unendurable and ought not to be endured by either rich or poor"²

This was his touchstone—the brotherhood of man

In his first year as a propagandist, Morris felt that he did best to confine his arguments to those fields where his own experience gave him most authority Hyndman and others, he felt, were better qualified than he to explain the principles of Socialism It seemed to him to be his special mission to arouse in the hearts of the workers aspirations for the life which capitalism denied them hope for their fulfilment in the struggle for Socialism. and shame among the middle class who rooted themselves in this oppression His first lecture after joining the Federation, delivered in Manchester in March, 1883, under the title of "Art, Wealth, and Riches", was an attack upon capitalist society more specific and outspoken than any he had made before

¹ Glasier, *op cit*, p 133

² *Letters*, p 176

but it stopped short of any specific declaration of Socialist doctrines

"What is to amend these grievances? You must not press me too close on that point. I believe I am in such a very small minority on these matters that it is enough for me if I find here and there some one who admits the grievances, for my business herein is to spread discontent. I do not think that this is an unimportant office, for, as discontent spreads, the yearning for bettering the state of things spreads with it."¹

The lecture called down the wrath of angry correspondents and leader-writers upon his head. *The Manchester Examiner and Times* received the lecture with "mingled feelings" (the war-cry of the choking bourgeois), denounced Morris for being "unpractical", and for being so successful in his avowed aim—the making of people discontented. *The Manchester Weekly Times* (which had had several days' breathing space to unmixle its feelings) reproved him with poised and lofty patronage, hoping "that he will reconsider his ideal, and have something less impracticable and less discouraging to say to us the next time"². One indignant correspondent declared that Morris had raised "another question than one of mere art". This was too much for Morris—as yet inexperienced in the typical reactions of the bourgeois Press. "Sir", he replied, "It was the purpose of my lecture to raise another question than one of 'mere art'":

"It may well be a burden to the conscience of an honest man who lives a more manlike life to think of the innumerable lives which are spent in toil unrelieved by hope and uncheered by praise, men who might as well, for all the good they are doing to their neighbours by their work, be turning a crank with nothing at the end of it."

"Over and over again have I asked myself why should not my lot be the common lot. My work is simple work enough, much of it, nor that the least, pleasant, any man of decent intelligence could do . . . Indeed I have been ashamed when I have thought of the contrast between my happy working hours and the unpraised, unrewarded, monotonous drudgery which most men are condemned to. Nothing shall convince me that such labour as this is good or necessary to civilization."³

¹ *Works*, Vol XXIII, p. 159

² *Manchester Examiner and Times*, March 7th, 1883, *Manchester Weekly Times*, March 10th, 1883

³ *Letters*, pp. 165–6 (*Manchester Examiner and Times*, March 19th, 1883)

In the chorus of protest, one sympathetic voice was heard

"It is a long time since I read anything upon art that has gratified me so much Although I never saw him, I felt that we were companions"¹

It was signed, "An Artisan".

So, in his first Socialist lecture, the pattern of his future reception was laid down After each lecture there would follow indignant letters to the local papers, and measured reproofs upon the "unpractical" poet in the editorial columns The Victorian middle class dearly loved a Reformer whose ideals were too dream-like ever to take practical shape But the chorus of "unpractical", "misguided idealist", "poet-upholsterer", and so forth, swelled to a crescendo the moment that Morris had found a *practical* remedy to the evils which he had before attacked, and had actively proclaimed himself to be a member of the *practical* revolutionary movement In October, 1884, the London *Echo* delivered a characteristic editorial rebuke

"Mr Morris is not content to be heard merely as a voice crying in the wilderness He will be content with nothing less than the propagation of his ideas by means which must result in a social revolution To that end he has allied himself with a body with the aims of which, we must charitably suppose, he is only in imperfect sympathy Judging him by the company he keeps, he would disturb the foundations of Society in order that a higher artistic value may be given to our carpets.

"We are a manufacturing nation We produce in order that we may sell to other countries The first thing is to exist, then to exist in as much comfort as possible, then to provide ourselves with luxuries Mr Morris has pitched his theories of life too high"²

On this occasion Morris replied, protesting, amongst other things, at "the assumption that I care only for Art and not for the other sides of the Social Questions I have been writing about", and also asserting his complete support for the S D F. "I have had my full share in every step it has taken since I joined it, and I fully sympathize with its aims"³ But the propaganda to divide, in the public mind, Morris, the author of *The Earthly Paradise*, from Morris, the Socialist, had some effect. "I remember

¹ *Manchester Examiner and Times*, March 19th, 1883

² *Echo*, October 1st, 1884

³ *Ibid*, October 7th, 1884

being in Norwich at a demonstration at which Morris and Faulkner were present", Sam Mainwaring recalled. After the meeting the comrades made up a party to visit Norwich Cathedral.

"Morris, of course, fell into the place of guide to us, and in his rough sailor-like fashion was pointing out the difference in the architecture of different periods and the beauty of all, when one of the ladies from [another] party asked Comrade Faulkner who Morris was. He answered her politely. Replying, she said 'The poet, I suppose, not the Socialist.' This time Faulkner asked very gruffly in return 'How can he be Morris the poet without being Morris the Socialist?'"¹

To the end of his life, his enemies and critics insisted upon trying to distinguish between the two.

"Discontent and hope", the "relation of Art to Labour"²—these were the burden of Morris's lectures until the summer of 1884.³ These lectures, with great variety of illustration and vigour of expression, followed a similar pattern. First Morris examined in some fresh and striking manner the reality of life and of labour in capitalist society, blowing away like cobwebs the usual nostrums of middle-class economists and moralists (and, in particular, the legend of the "freedom" of the individual within capitalism), and revealing the sordid, shabby and wasteful truth. Next, he presented by contrast the vision of true society, creative and responsive to beauty, and called his listeners to action in the struggle to achieve this vision. "Misery and the

¹ *Freedom*, January, 1897: cf. Eleanor Marx's description (in *To-day*, May, 1884) of the opening by William Morris of an art exhibition in the East End, under philanthropic auspices. "William Morris made a splendid speech. The room was crowded with ladies and gentlemen who had come there thoroughly satisfied with themselves and each other, and with a pleasing sense of virtuous superiority. It was amusing to note the astonishment not unmingled with irritation of these good people when the poet in very plain prose told them they were not so very superior after all."

² See Morris to Charles Rowley, a well-known Manchester reformer, October 25th, 1883. "I have only one subject to lecture on, the relation of Art to Labour: also I am an open and declared Socialist, or to be more specific, Collectivist." (*Letters*, p. 189).

³ The main lectures he was offering at this time were "Useful Work versus Useless Toil", "Art and Labour", "Misery and the Way Out", and "How We Live and How We Might Live". Contributions to *Justice* included, "Art or No Art", "The Dull Level of Life", "Individualism at the Royal Academy", and "Work in a Factory as it Might Be".

Way Out", for example, commenced with a careful discussion of the reasons for discontent in every class of society, and continued with an analysis of the causes of discontent in the facts of class oppression and exploitation

"Though it is futile to cast blame on any individual of the richer classes I yet want to impress the fact upon you that as classes you and they are and must be opposed to each other Whatever gain you add to your standard of life, you must do at their expense, and they will and must resist it to the utmost of their power The whole of the domination of the upper classes is founded on deliberate injustice, and that injustice I want you to feel, because when you once feel that you are slaves then the emancipation of labour is at hand I know that in a country and time like our own, people do not readily feel that slavery if you were treated with obvious violence, were liable to be tied up and whipped, or to have your ears cut off at the bidding of your masters, nay, if you had to go to the Police Office for a passport to go from Southwark to Hammersmith, it would soon be a different thing, you would soon be in the streets, I hope, expressing your feelings in something stronger than words"¹

But suppose you had a fine standard of life—he continued—and it was torn from you—*then* you would revolt, or else submit to being a slave This is what has been done to you, at your birth—"and alas! you have got used to it, you are contented" And so the lecture rose to its climax

"It is to stir you up not to be contented with a little that I am here to-night you will not get the little if you are contented with it you *must* be either slaves or free you are slaves at present bear that always in mind, think of what it means try to think of the life you might live and would naturally live if you were not forced into misery by your masters, and then I do not think that you can help combining together to tell the world that you must be free and happy and then all will soon be won"²

So he spread the message of discontent—his study of Marx giving his passages of historical analysis new clarity, his reading of Cobbett giving an additional sting and power to his phrases, his contact with working-class audiences giving greater simplicity to his arguments This turn to working-class clubs came directly after the Manchester lecture "The philistines are much moved by it", he wrote to his daughter, Jenny in March, 1883.

¹ Brit Mus Add MSS 45333

² May Morris, II, p 159-60

"So you see one may yet arrive at the dignity of being hissed for a Socialist down there all this is encouraging

"I am now about a lecture for a club in connection with the Democratic Federation, I intend making this one more plain-spoken I am tired of being mealy mouthed"¹

In April he was lecturing to a Radical Club in Hampstead in May to a sympathetic audience at the Irish National League rooms in Blackfriars' Road In May, also, he was "driven into joining" the Executive of the Federation²

Then lecturing engagements began to come thick and fast, not only to small groups in London, but—before the summer of 1884—in many provincial centres, among them Manchester (again), Leicester, Birmingham, Bradford, Edinburgh, Leeds, and Blackburn Sometimes the request came from an individual or two or three Socialists struggling to form a branch sometimes from some other body interested in hearing the Socialist case At several of these centres he was the first speaker to address a large public meeting on behalf of the new Cause These lectures were generally well-attended although only 12 people attended the first meeting (addressed by Hyndman and Morris) in Birmingham Debating societies, Sunday Lecture Societies, Secular Societies, Radical Clubs—all these kept alive public interest in controversial lectures and an audience of up to 1,000 in the seven or eight major cities was not exceptional

At some time in 1883 the Federation decided to follow the pioneering work of the Labour Emancipation League, and take a hand in the open-air propaganda. Morris's own part can be read in *The Pilgrims of Hope*.

"Until it befel at last that to others I needs must speak
(Indeed, they pressed me to that while yet I was weaker than weak)
So I began the business, and in street-corners I spake
To knots of men Indeed, that made my very heart ache,
So hopeless it seemed, for some stood by like men of wood,
And some, though fain to listen, but a few words understood,
And some but hooted and jeered but whiles across some I came
Who were keen and eager to hear, as in dry flax the flame

¹ *Letters*, p. 167

² *Ibid.*, p. 172 "I don't like belonging to a body without knowing what they are doing without feeling very sanguine about their doings they seem certainly to mean something money is chiefly lacking as usual" Bax claimed that Morris joined the Executive as a result of his persuasions (see Bax, *op cit*, p. 76)

So the quick thought flickered amongst them and that indeed was a feast

So about the streets I went, and the work on my hands increased;
And to say the very truth betwixt the smooth and the rough
It was work and hope went with it, and I liked it well enough "

According to Scheu's recollections, the decision to take up this work was the cause of some of the first dissension on the Executive of the Federation, and was pushed through by himself, Morris, Champion, Banner, Bax and Joynes against the opposition of Hyndman, who opposed Sunday meetings "as a 'continental idea' whose introduction into England would not meet with the sympathy of the English people".¹ If this is true, Hyndman's warning was soon disproved. Until this time only the free-thinkers had held regular Sunday open-air meetings, and these were often in the form of a religious service. By the summer of 1884 the Socialist open-air meetings by the Reformer's Tree in Hyde Park, or in Regent's Park, were well established. *Justice* was sold, and even statesmen strolled over sometimes to hear Morris or Hyndman or Jack Williams or John Burns holding forth.² Scheu, it is true, refused even to give Hyndman credit for his part in their success, and whether his bitter comment is fair or not, it is worth recording for the light it throws upon the antagonism already growing up within the Federation.

"When Hyndman saw our success in the open-air he had to have his part in it, the dominating part, and he appeared on Sunday on our platform in Regent's Park as a speaker, dressed in frockcoat and top hat, a typical representative of the bourgeoisie, and without the intention of disturbing our meeting or breaking it up 'Just look,' he said, turning round on the platform (a tottering chair) and pulling out the back pocket of his coat, 'just look, I am not carrying any bombs, and you may believe me when I say that I have stepped on to this platform with the most peaceful intentions' "

"No one doubted it "3

But the open-air propaganda was one of the most fruitful forms of the early agitation, and was the means by which hundreds of workers were introduced to Socialism. A vivid picture of Morris at one such meeting in Victoria Park (in 1885) is given in Tom Mann's *Memoirs*

¹ Scheu, *op cit*, Part III, Ch V

² See Lee, *op cit*, p 66

³ Scheu, *op cit*, Part III, Ch V

"He was a picture on an open air platform. The day was fine, the branches of the tree under which he was speaking spread far over the speaker. Getting him well in view, the thought came, and has always recurred as I think of that first sight of Morris—'Bluff King Hal' I did not give careful attention to what he was saying, for I was chiefly concerned to get the picture of him in my mind, and then to watch the faces of the audience to see how they were impressed. Nineteenths were giving careful attention, but on the fringe of the crowd were some who had just accidentally arrived, being out for a walk, and having unwittingly come upon the meeting. These stragglers were making such remarks as 'Oh, this is the share-and-share-alike crowd', 'Poverty, eh, he looks all right, don't he?' But the audience were not to be distracted by attempts at ribaldry and as Morris stepped off the improvised platform, they gave a fine, hearty hand-clapping which showed real appreciation."¹

Meanwhile Morris was serving his apprenticeship to other forms of propaganda. Edward Carpenter, who—from his first reading of Hyndman's *England for All*—had become an enthusiastic Socialist convert, donated £300 for the launching of *Justice*, "The Organ of the Social Democracy", the first weekly Socialist paper.² James Macdonald has given a vivid picture of the

¹ Tom Mann, *op cit*, pp 48-9

² *The Christian Socialist*, a monthly, was the first in the field, commencing in the summer of 1883. It was not the organ of F. D. Maurice and Charles Kingsley, but of a new group, including the Rev. John Glasse, Rev. Alex. Webster, Rev. Stewart Headlam, Rev. Charles Marson (who edited it to the end of 1886) and Paul Campbell, who edited it from 1887 to 1890. A letter of Morris to Faulkner, quoted in part by Mackail (II, p. 123), written in March, 1884, suggests that he was impatient of the hesitant attitude of some of this group. "The Christian Church has always declared against Socialism, its mainstays must always be property and authority. Of course as long as people are ignorant, compromise *plus* sentiment always looks better to them than the real article." On the other hand, *The Christian Socialist* contained some good, hard-hitting material, was generous in the notice it gave to the S.D.F. in 1884, and introduced many fine workers to the movement. Several of the group were warm admirers of Morris, and in October, 1883, the paper recorded that his poem, "The Day is Coming", "was read from the pulpit of at least one London church on the 23rd September, and will be heard from other pulpits during the next few weeks." During these first two or three years Morris strove within the councils of the movement to prevent the dogmatic atheists from driving off allies by enforcing their views on the movement (see *Letters*, p. 181), while at the same time expressing himself privately to Scheu "As to the Students I fear that the damned religion is at the bottom of their hanging back" (*Letters*, p. 203). Later he became a close comrade of the Rev. John Glasse of Edinburgh, and warmly admired his part in the movement.

enthusiastic and united meeting at which Hyndman announced the new project

"He began in the ordinary business tone, then growing warmer, he declaimed against anonymous commercial journalism, and described the power we should have in a paper of our own. Raising his voice he declared that humbug, political, social and scientific, would be exposed, art was to be emancipated (here Morris nearly shook his shaggy head off with approving nods) and the workers of the world would be united by means of a great free, independent Press!"¹

The first number, on January 19th, 1884, contained a satirical fable by Morris, on the theme of reformism and parliamentary democracy. The fowls of the barnyard were pictured as calling packed meetings to discuss the issue, "With what sauce shall we be eaten?" The bediaggled cock who had the temerity to suggest that he did not want to be eaten at all was howled down by cries of "practical politics!" "county franchise", "great liberal party", "municipal government for—Coxstead!" In the result, "slow stewing was settled on as the least revolutionary form of cookery. Moral Citizens, pray draw it for yourselves."

Since *Justice* could only be run on a weekly deficit, Morris was soon reaching deep into his pocket. The paper was advertised by street-sales, and on several week-ends Hyndman in his frock coat, Morris in his soft hat and blue suit, Champion, Joynes, Jack Williams and other working-class comrades took it out in the City and on the Strand. In March, 1884, on the first anniversary of Marx's death, Morris took part in his first public procession.

"I was loth to go, but did not dislike it when I did go. brief, I trudged all the way from Tottenham Court Rd up to Highgate Cemetery (with a red-ribbon in my button-hole) at the tail of various banners and a very bad band to do honour to the memory of Karl Marx and the Commune. the thing didn't look as absurd as it sounds, as we were a tidy number, I should think more than a thousand in the procession, and onlookers to the amount, when we got to the end, of some 2 or 3 thousand more."²

They were refused entrance to the cemetery, "of course", by a heavy guard of police, and adjourned to some waste ground, where speeches were made (one being by Dr. Aveling) and the International was sung.

¹ *Justice*, January, 1914

² *Letters* p 195.

In general, the propaganda in these two years was heavy going, in the face of apathy and insult

"Dull they most of them stood
As though they heeded nothing, nor thought of bad or of good,
Not even that they were poor, and haggard and dirty and dull
Nay, some were so rich indeed that they with liquor were full,
And dull wrath rose in their souls as the hot words went by their ears,
For they deemed that they were mocked and rated by men that were
more than their peers
But for some, they seemed to think that a prelude was all this
To the preachment of saving of souls, and hell, and endless bliss,
While some (O the hearts of slaves!) although they might understand,
When they heard their masters and feeders called thieves of wealth and
of land,
Were as angry as though *they* were cursed Withal there were some that
heard,
And stood and pondered it all, and garnered a hope and a word
Ah! heavy my heart was grown as I gazed on the terrible throng
Lo! these that should have been the glad and the deft and the strong,
How were they dull and abased as the very filth of the road!
And who should waken their souls or clear their hearts of the load?

Only on one occasion, in early 1884, did the Federation make serious contact with the broad masses of the industrial workers. The occasion was the great Lancashire cotton strike in February and March. James MacDonald and Jack Williams were sent up to Blackburn as agitators. They issued bills calling a meeting to be addressed by "delegates from London", and filled the largest hall with 1,500 of the strikers.

"They waited patiently while Morris and Joynes and Hyndman spoke, to hear the message the delegates had brought them about their own particular business . . . Their interest was aroused in the message of Socialism and the meeting was a tremendous success."¹

Nearly 100 joined the Federation, a branch was formed, and Morris was able to comment in a letter, "all likely to do well there". In fact, from this time onwards the Federation maintained its foothold in Lancashire.

Such occasions as this did not often present themselves. The propagandists had to look for every opportunity for gathering a crowd, or intruding into meetings held under other auspices. It

¹ James Macdonald, "How I Became a Socialist", *Justice*, July 11th, 1896 and *Justice*, February 23rd, 1884.

was Charles Bradlaugh, now declared as an uncompromising opponent of Socialism, who gave the greatest fillip to the movement in London by accepting the challenge of the Federation's Executive to engage in public debate with Hyndman. The debate took place on April 17th, 1884, with Professor Beesly in the Chair, and although the oratorical honours may have gone to Bradlaugh, the event aroused discussion on Socialism throughout the Secularist and Radical movement. MORRIS's contribution to the debate was the poem, "All for the Cause"

"Hear a word, a word in season, for the day is drawing nigh,
When the Cause shall call upon us, some to live, and some to die'

"He that dies shall not be lonely, many an one hath gone before,
He that lives shall bear no burden heavier than the life they bore

"Nothing ancient is their story, e'en but yesterday they bled,
Youngest they of earth's beloved, last of all the valiant dead"

In the spring of 1884, it seemed indeed that the Cause was gaining ground. A remarkable band of men were gathered together: Hyndman, Burrows, Quelch and Joynes; Champion, a determined organizer, Bax, whom Morris dubbed the "philosopher of the movement", Scheu, an impressive orator, John Burns (a new recruit) wielding increasing influence among his fellow trade unionists, William Morris himself. The first contacts had been made with the workers of the industrial North. There was a feeling of confidence within the small organization, and excitement at every new recruit. "The Day is Coming", William Morris wrote, and he was unafraid at the prospect of bloodshed. "Commercialism, competition, has sown the wind recklessly, and must reap the whirlwind", he wrote in October, 1883. "it has created the proletariat for its own interest, and its creation will and must destroy it: there is no other force which can do so"¹ In November, 1883, he wrote of Socialism to the *Standard*

"It is true that before this good time comes we shall have trouble, and loss, and misery enough to wade through, the injustice of past years will not be got rid of by the sprinkling of rosewater, the price must be paid for it"²

¹ *Letters*, p. 190

² *Standard*, November 22nd, 1883. The opening paragraphs of the letter are included by Mr. Henderson in *Letters*, p. 191, but the final sentence is omitted.

So far from shrinking back from the "Day", and despite his own "religious hatred" of all war and violence,¹ he proudly sounded the call to battle

"Come, then, let us cast off fooling, and put by ease and rest
For the CAUSE alone is worthy till the good days bring the best

"Come, join in the only battle wherein no man can fail,
Where whoso fadeth and dieth, yet his deed shall still prevail

"Ah! come, cast off all fooling, for this, at least we know
That the Dawn and the Day is coming, and forth the Banners go "

IV. "Oh, it is monstrous"

This kind of stuff, of course, was a long way beyond a joke. The man had been reprov'd in moderate terms by the Editor of the *Manchester Examiner*. He had been called to task more sternly by the Master of University College, Oxford. He had been shown his error, reminded of the public school code which governed middle-class life ("you can carp at the Masters in the prefects' room, if you like, but don't let the fags or the Lower Fourth hear you"). Now there was little that could be done but to blacken his character and ignore him. "We believe that Mr Morris contributes 1s a week towards enlightening the world as to the aims of the Social Democratic Federation", declared the London *Echo* (inaccurately), when Morris had had the temerity to reply to its original reproof (see p. 359). "Not much is to be apprehended from contributions of these amounts . . ."² "His utterances are curiously ineffectual", remarked the *Saturday Review* on January 10th, 1885, in an editorial which sums up so well two years of the expression of the "mingled feelings" of the capitalist Press that it may be taken as his formal notice of public expulsion from the precincts of St. Grundy's, "since he left off poetry, which he understood, and took to politics, of which he knows nothing"

"People . . . may have faintly hoped that Mr Morris would give . . . some new lights on that very difficult point of conscience and conduct, the fact of a capitalist and 'profit-monger' denouncing capitalists and profit-mongers without . . . making the least attempt to pour his

¹ The phrase is used in a letter to T. C. Horsfall very early in 1883, and quoted in Mackail, II, p. 98

² *Echo*, October 8th, 1884

capital into the lap of the Socialist Church, or to divide his profits weekly with the sons of toil who make them "

And so to the final magisterial sweep of the cane "the intellectual disaster of the intelligence of a man who could once write *The Earthly Paradise*"

Meanwhile, the house-mistresses sobbed at the back of the hall over the Fall of a boy so promising and of such *nice* upbringing Their sentiments were voiced by George Gissing through the medium of a character in his novel, *Demos*, published a couple of years later ("Westlake" was a character drawn intermittently from Morris)

"Now here is an article signed by Westlake You know his books? How has he fallen to this? His very style has abandoned him, his English smacks of the street corners, of Radical clubs The man is ruined, it is next to impossible that he should ever again do good work, such as we used to have from him The man who wrote 'Daphne'! Oh, it is monstrous!"¹

So, amid the fluttering handkerchiefs, the snuffles, and the resounding thwacks of the cane, Morris was ushered out of middle-class life

Much of this Morris had expected, for some of it he did not care tuppence—but, nevertheless, some of it *did* sting As far as the general run of criticism went, Morris usually ignored it, unless he saw an opportunity for explaining more clearly some point in the Socialist case.

But the attack on his own position as an employer caused him some uneasiness It was initiated by a correspondent in the *Standard* in November, 1883, and drew from Morris a prompt reply

"Your correspondent implies that, to be consistent, we should at once cast aside our position of capitalists, and take rank with the proletariat, but he must excuse my saying that he knows very well that we

¹ *Demos* was published in 1886 Gissing's flirtation with Socialism was exceedingly brief and half-hearted, and in 1884 and 1885 he occasionally attended Socialist meetings to collect "copy" for this novel On November 22nd, 1885, he was writing to his sister "I have finished a third of the first volume of *Demos* And now I am obliged to go about attending Socialist meetings To-night I go to one at the house of the poet Morris in Hammersmith You know Morris, though, I fear, only by name His taking to Socialism is extraordinary, seeing that the man's life has hitherto been devoted to Art I hope to see him to-night "

are not able to do so, that the most we can do is to palliate, as far as we can, the evils of the unjust system which we are forced to sustain, that we are but minute links in the immense chain of the terrible organization of competitive commerce, and that only the complete unrivetting of that chain will really free us. It is this very sense of the helplessness of our individual efforts which arms us against our own class, which compels us to take an active part in the agitation which, if it be successful, will deprive us of our capitalist position."¹

A day or two later he was writing to "Georgie" Burne-Jones

"I have been living in a sort of storm of newspaper brickbats, to some of which I had to reply of course I don't mind a bit, nor even think the attack unfair"²

A prompt answer had come from his own workers at Merton Abbey, who "are very sympathetic, which pleases me hugely", and seven of whom had insisted on forming the Merton Abbey branch of the Democratic Federation. But, for all his self-assurance, Morris was by no means satisfied with his reply, especially when the question was renewed, from allies as well as enemies.

For example, among Morris's acquaintances was Thomas James Cobden-Sanderson (the Cobden was borrowed from his wife, a daughter of the famous Richard) who had recently decided to Renounce Society, and go in for a Simple Life. Morris, who always had time for any intellectual who had artistic abilities and a sincere dislike of Podsnappery, helped him to start work as a bookbinder (and also gave him his first commission, the binding of his copy of *Capital*). At the time that the *Standard* attack came out, the Cobden-Sandersons were taking their Simple Life (which included some activity both in the Democratic Federation and in the Charity Organization Society) very seriously indeed, even though some of their relatives and friends received the news with disappointing equanimity.³ "Annie Cobb S.", Morris remarked good-humouredly, "is a very unregenerate person with a furious fad towards vegetarianism, in which I see no harm, if it didn't swallow up more important

¹ *Letters*, p. 191.

² *Ibid*, p. 191.

³ Lady Russell responded to the news of Cobden-Sanderson's transformation into a manual labourer with the absent-minded reply "I can well understand the interest of being brought into contact with a class of human beings of whom we know little except by the articles they produce."

matters"¹ At any rate, the Cobb. S's, from the height of their self-righteousness, were among those who saw fit to badger Morris about his personal affairs "Morris came to see me . . .", Cobb S entered in his Diary on January 16th, 1884.

"We told him we thought he ought to put his principles into practice in his own case that his appeal would be much more powerful if he did so He said he was in a corner and could not, that no one person could, that, to say the truth, he was a coward and feared to do so, that there was his wife, and the girls, and how could he put it upon them? Dear old Morris, he would be happier if he could put his ideas into practice"²

Morris had already made a serious sacrifice to the Cause, raising money from the sale of some of the most treasured early books in his private collection.³ There is reason to believe that in the early months of 1884 he very seriously considered taking a further step according to Scheu (who was one of his closest confidants at this time) he intended to sell his business and live with his family upon £4 a week. and had he not sunk his lifework as an artist into the Firm, he might well have done so But on June 1st, 1884, his mind was at last decided against this plan and the long letter which he wrote to his closest friend, "Georgie" Burne-Jones, was the result of a decision only reached after long and serious deliberation

The argument turned on the question of profit-sharing within the Firm ("What is it", he asked on another occasion but "feeding the dog with his own tail") In fact, some limited form of profit-sharing was already in operation in the Firm,⁴ although not extended to the whole business Morris's own share of the profits in the past year had been about £1,800, his literary income £120

"Now you know we ought to be able to live upon £4 a week, & give the literary income to the revolutionary agitation, but here comes the rub, and I feel the pinch of society, for which society I am only responsible in a very limited degree And yet if Janey and Jenny were quite

¹ *Letters*, p 193

² *The Journals of Thomas James Cobden-Sanderson*

³ Mackail, II, p 87 "You have no revolution on hand on which to spend your money", he wrote to Ellis, his publisher, in May, 1883 (Mackail, II, p 101)

⁴ See the account of Thomas Wardle in May Morris, II, p 603

well and capable I think they ought not to grumble at living on the said £4, nor do I think they would "

Evidently Janey was opposed to the scheme, and Jenny's continuing illness weighed upon Morris. But even supposing he were to live upon this income, the £1,600 surplus profit would amount only to a bonus of £16 a year when divided among the hundred workers. Compared with the average ratio of profit to wages in a normal business, the profits of the Morris Firm were remarkably small, several incompetents were employed out of goodwill, and the majority of workers were receiving wages higher than "the market price." Even supposing the profits to be distributed were larger, Morris could not see that any principle would be served.

"Much as I want to see workmen escape from their slavish position, I don't at all want to see a few individuals more creep out of their class, into the middle-class, this will only make the poor poorer still "

And so he brought his argument to a conclusion.

"Here then is a choice for a manufacturer ashamed of living on surplus value: shall he do his best to further a revolution of the basis of society which would turn all people into workers, as it would give a chance for all workers to become refined and dignified in their life, or shall he ease his conscience by dropping a certain portion of his profits to bestow on his handful of workers? if he *can* do both things let him do so, and make his conscience surer, but if he must choose between the furthering of a great principle, and the staunching of 'the pangs of conscience', I should think him right to choose the first course because although it is *possible* that here & there a capitalist may be found who could & would be content to carry on his business at (say) foreman's wages, it is *impossible* that the capitalist class could do so: the very point of its existence is manufacturing for a profit and not for a livelihood . " ¹

The decision was clearly a difficult one for Morris to take. Parts of this letter (so clear on questions of general principle) have the air of a reluctant rationalization of a position with which he was not wholly satisfied, since in the result it meant that he could maintain his own privileged standard of life among comrades in extreme poverty. "If he *can* do both things, let him do so "

¹ *Letters*, pp. 197-9. Morris wrote another extremely clear letter on the question of profit-sharing to Emma Lazarus (April 21st, 1884), published in *The Century Magazine*, 1886.

—there is a suggestion here of that feeling of “guilt” which Beatrice Webb once suggested underlay the attitudes of some of her middle-class contemporaries. On the one hand Morris was urging upon all his comrades sacrifice in the Cause on the other hand, his own table was well spread, his cellar stocked, he was surrounded by his books and his crafts. And for this reason he was always ready to reach into his pocket whenever he was asked.

Once the decision was taken, however, Morris—as always—dismissed the argument from his mind. He did not attempt a detailed public defence of his position, once he had straightened the matter out with “Georgie” he seemed to be satisfied “certain things occurred to me which being written you may pitch into the fire if you please”. Thereafter—although in the press of his Socialist activities the day to day management of the Firm passed more and more into the hands of Thomas Wardle—he maintained a constant supervision over the conditions of the workers. Many commentators left accounts of the sense of freedom, cleanliness and light in the Merton Abbey Works, and of the beauty of its surroundings.¹ “Here is none of the ordinary neat pomposity of ‘business premises’”, wrote one contemporary “We turn through doors into a large, low room, where the hand-made carpets are being worked. It is not crowded. In the middle sits a woman finishing off some completed rugs, in a corner is a large pile of worsted of a magnificent red, heaped becomingly into a deep-coloured straw basket. The room is full of sunlight and colour.” Close to the workshops Morris had his own studio, overlooking the gardens and the River Wandle, from which he would frequently come out from his designing to give advice in the details of the manufacture—

“an extra ounce of indigo to strengthen the dye, an additional five minutes’ immersion of threads in the vat, a weft of colour to be swept through the warp in a moment of inspiration, a dappling of bright points to lighten some over-sombre hue in the grounding of a carpet”

In the words of one who worked here, wages were raised

“to the highest which each particular product would afford. He substituted piece work founded on the advanced rates of wages for the time

¹ Aymer Vallance, *William Morris, His Art, His Writing and His Public Life*, pp. 124 ff.

work wherever the occupation permitted it, thus giving the workman a greater liberty as to the disposal of his time Piece workers could then occasionally knock off for an hour's work in the garden—the garden having been allotted in sections to the piece workers Any objection or claim made by the workman was listened to as if it came from an equal and decided according to the equity of the case "

"No one", the account concludes, "having worked for Mr. Morris would willingly have joined any other workshop "¹

V *Letters and Articles*

If Morris had had any doubts as to the reality of the "river of fire", they were answered in this first year and a half of active propaganda In a hundred ways he felt the breaking of old ties which bound him to his own class and the hostility of "Society" turned towards him

Philip Webb, it is true, with his absolute artistic integrity and his grave appraisal of Morris's greatness, fell quietly into the Socialist movement while Charlie Faulkner jumped in with both feet, set to work to organize an Oxford branch, and would have been ready to finish the job at once with dynamite if Morris had given the word. Ruskin, as we have seen, could only send encouragement, and Swinburne, when invited by Morris to contribute to Bax's Socialist monthly, *To-day* ("You ought to write us a song, you know that's what you ought to do") had wriggled out with some loss of self-respect (see p 312) Burne-Jones detested the new turn of events, while William De Morgan, the potter, who had backed up Morris in the E Q A was equally disgusted "I was rather disconcerted", he wrote—

"when I found that an honest objection to Bulgarian atrocities had been held to be one and the same thing as sympathy with Karl Marx, and that Morris took it for granted that I should be ready for enrolment "²

In the first days of his enthusiasm, Morris attempted to convert many of his old Liberal friends After successive failures, he abandoned the attempt, and—since they no longer shared the same central interests—he and they began to drift apart

But to the end of his life Morris accepted it as one of his

¹ MSS account by a member of the Firm, Brit. Mus Add MSS 45350.

² Mackail, II, p 120

major responsibilities to serve as a propagandist on the middle-class wing of the movement. To any serious inquiry he was patient and sympathetic sometimes writing letters which ran into many pages in order to enter into the doubts of his questioner. His letters to "George" Burne-Jones, in particular, show him taking endless pains, as though he were determined to keep open at least one road of human understanding with his own past

The hardy perennial—now, as then—among the questions which were put to Morris concerned the relation of the individual man of the middle-class, with goodwill and lofty motives, to the historical concept of the class war. How could Morris associate with Socialists who denounced the capitalists as a class? Was he not aware that many manufacturers were kindly, good-natured fellows, with the interests of their workpeople at heart? Could he not understand that his cultivated friends were as distressed at the sight of poverty as he was himself? Was he not aware of the excellent motives animating the middle-class reformers, in their various philanthropic schemes? Again and again in the next few years, but especially in this first year and a half of activity, Morris strove to make the answer clear in private letters, lectures and articles. "As to what you say about employers and employed in Lancashire", came the weary reply to one questioner—

"it seems to me to point to our disastrous system of production, because after all the masters and middlemen are of the same blood as the men, it is their *position* therefore which turns good fellows into tyrants and cheats, in fact *forces* them to be so"¹

"A society which is founded on the system of *compelling* all well-to-do people to live on making the greatest possible profit out of the labour of others, must be wrong", he wrote to T. C. Horsfall in September, 1883

"Of course I do not discuss these matters with you or any person of good will in any bitterness but there are people with whom it is hard to keep one's temper, such as the philistine middle-class Radicals, who think, or pretend to, that now at last all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds"²

A month later he was explaining to the same correspondent that

¹ Morris to Birchall, November 7th, 1883, Brit. Mus. Add. MSS. 45347

² *Letters*, p. 182

he agreed "that the rich do not act as they do in the matter from malice".

"Nevertheless their position (as a class) forces them to 'strive' (unconsciously most often I know) to keep the working men in ignorance of their rights and their power"¹

The Socialists, he explained, were leading a *constructive* revolutionary movement the alternative might be that "discontent unlighted by hope" would take the form "of a passionate desire for mere anarchy"²

"I earnestly wish," he wrote to C E Maurice, "that the middle classes, to whom hitherto I have personally addressed myself, should become discontented also. They themselves suffer from the same system which oppresses the poor, their lives made barren and dull by it, their hopes for a higher standard of life repressed"³

And so—with a flaring up of the impatience he had first shown in his "Manifesto to the Working Men" at the time of the Eastern Question—he brought his second letter to T C Horsfall to an end.

"You think that *individuals* of good will belonging to all classes of men can bring about the change. I on the contrary think that the basis of all change must be, as it has always been, the antagonism of classes. Though here and there a few men of the upper and middle classes, moved by their conscience and insight, may and doubtless will throw in their lot with the working classes, the upper and middle classes as a body will by the very nature of their existence, and like a plant grows, resist the abolition of classes. I do not say that there is not a terrible side to this but how can it be otherwise? For my part I have never under-rated the power of the middle-classes, whom, in spite of their individual good nature and banality, I look upon as a most terrible and implacable force so terrible that I think it not unlikely that their resistance to inevitable change may, if the beginnings of change are too long delayed, ruin all civilization for a time"⁴

This theme Morris pursued in 1884, not only in private correspondence, but also in articles in *Justice*. The recent publication of the findings of the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Poor had directed attention to the appalling condition of the slums, and the efforts of Octavia Hill and others to find some remedy. Here Morris found a text to show the futility of even

¹ *Letters*, p. 190 ² *Ibid*, p. 190 ³ *Ibid*, pp. 176-7. ⁴ *Ibid*, p. 190

the best intentioned attempts to relieve the squalor of capitalist society "As long as there are poor people they will be poorly housed", he pointed out

"Understand this clearly,—as long as labour, that is the lives of the strong and deft men, is a *commodity* which can only be bought when it yields a profit to the non-worker, we cannot be allowed to use the earth to *live on* like men, it is all wanted to *work on* like machines and just as much of the produce of our work will be given to us as will keep the *machines* going"¹

"What we should press upon" these well-intentioned reformers, he declared in a later article on "Philanthropists",

"is that they should set a higher ideal before them than turning the life of the workers into that of a well-conducted reformatory or benevolent prison, and that they should understand that when things are done not *for* the workers but *by* them, an ideal will present itself with great distinctness to the workers themselves"²

And so to the next two hardy perennials was it not dangerous to stir up the workers with discontent, without first raising their standard of education? Was Morris not deliberately encouraging violent and bloody revolt? When posed by "Georgie" Burne-Jones, these questions brought forward a considered answer

"I am sure it is right, whatever the apparent consequences may be, to stir up the lower classes (damn the word) to demand a higher standard of life for themselves, not merely for themselves or for the sake of the material comfort it will bring, but for the good of the whole world and the regeneration of the conscience of man and this stirring up is part of the necessary education which must in good truth go before the reconstruction of society"³

As for violence, it was not of his own choosing, but was part of the very condition of capitalist society.

"If these were ordinary times of peace I might be contented amidst my discontent, to settle down into an ascetic hermit of a hanger-on, such a man as I should respect even now but I don't see the peace or feel it, on the contrary, fate, or what not has forced me to feel war, and lays hands on me as a recruit therefore do I find it not only lawful to my conscience but even compulsory on it to do what in times of peace would not perhaps be lawful if I am wrong, I am wrong, and there is an end of it I can't expect pardon or consideration of anyone—and shan't ask it"⁴

¹ *Justice*, July 19th, 1884

² *Ibid*, December 20th, 1884

³ *Letters*, p 182

⁴ *Ibid*, p 200

The means by which Socialism will be brought about, he wrote to a young sympathizer in July, 1884, are

"First, educating people into desiring it, next organizing them into claiming it effectually. Whatever happens in the course of this education and organization must be accepted coolly and as a necessary incident, and not disclosed as a matter of essential principle, even if those incidents should mean ruin and war. I mean that we must not say, 'We must drop our purpose rather than carry it across this river of violence'. To say that means casting the whole thing into the hands of chance, and we can't do that. We *can't* say, if this is the evolution of history, let it evolve itself, we won't help. The evolution will force us to help. It will breed in us passionate desire for action, which will quench the dread of consequences."¹

"I cannot assure you", he told the Leicester Secular Society, in January, 1884, "that if you join the Socialist Cause,

"you will for ever escape scot-free from the attacks of open tyranny. It is true that at present capitalist society only looks on Socialism in England with dry grins. But remember that the body of people who have for instance ruined India, starved and gagged Ireland, and tortured Egypt, have capacities in them, some ominous signs of which they have lately shown, for openly playing the tyrant's game nearer home."²

Not all these questions came from hostile or philistine quarters. Some of Morris's friends were genuinely anxious to enter into his views, but halted in alarm when they saw the consequences that must flow from them. Some of their alarm was of a warm and personal nature. Morris, they could see, was changing before their own eyes. "Georgie" Burne-Jones wrote to him in August, 1883, in anxiety about his poetry. His answer was friendly but firm. He could not feel his poetry to be of any great value, "except as showing my sympathy with history and the like".

"Poetry goes with the hand-arts. I think, and like them has now become unreal. The arts have got to die, what is left of them, before they can be born again. You know my views on the matter, I apply them to myself as well as to others."

This would not prevent him from writing poetry any more than from doing pattern work, from "the mere personal pleasure" of the work. "but it prevents my looking at it as a sacred duty", while his personal grief over the illness of his daughter Jenny disquieted him too much to take such pleasure in any writing.

¹ *Letters*, p. 207.

² *Works*, Vol. XXIII, p. 214.

"Meantime the propaganda gives me work to do, which, unimportant as it seems, is part of a great whole which cannot be lost, and that ought to be enough for me . . ."¹

Further enquiries brought a reply to "Georgie" the next month, "I cannot *help* acting in the matter, and associating with any body which has the root of the matter"

"It may ease your kind heart respecting me, that those who are in the thick of it, and trying to do something, are not likely to feel so much of the hope deferred which hangs about the cause as onlookers do"²

By the beginning of 1884 the Cause was absorbing more and more of his attention one friend remarked, "he can talk about little else, and will brook no opposition" Casual and superficial discussions on Socialism "became less and less possible".³ The easy-going evenings at Kelmscott House, when discussion roamed from topic to topic, became less frequent, although they sometimes recurred⁴ On June 1st, 1884, Morris was writing—once again to "Georgie" Burne-Jones

"I cannot deny that if ever the D F were to break down, it would be a heavy thing to me, petty skirmish though it would make in the great war Whatever hope or life there is in me is staked on the success of the cause I believe you object to the word but I know no other to express what I mean Of course I don't mean to say that I necessarily expect to see much of it before I die, and yet something I hope to see"⁵

With one argument only Morris had no patience whatsoever When his old acquaintances deprecated his new associates he rarely troubled even to reply When he did so, his answer was brief and blunt, as Andreas Scheu recalled

"When one of his bourgeois friends once asked him whether he did not shrink from going in rank and file with Tom, Dick and Harry, he

¹ *Letters*, p 180

² *Ibid*, p 182

³ Mackail, II, pp 120-1

⁴ See *Journals of T J Cobden-Sanderson*, April 1st, 1884 "On Sunday we supped with the Morrises We got off the subject of Socialism for a wonder, and on to the subject of Iceland and Swinburne's estimate, in the *Nineteenth Century*, of Byron and Wordsworth Morris was unmeasured in his abuse of Wordsworth and vastly preferred Byron, whom he admitted, however, to be in the main a rhetorician We then got on to hero-worship, which Morris denounced"

⁵ *Letters*, p 200

replied. 'As far as that goes, I find anyone is good enough to be my comrade''¹

VI An Incident at Hyde Park

A final picture can be given of Morris's part in the early propaganda. The occasion was the great demonstration of Radical working men, called in Hyde Park on Monday, July 23rd, 1884, by the London Trades Council, when the House of Lords had rejected the Third Reform Act which introduced the County Franchise. The tide of Radical feeling was rising high: the call for the abolition of the House of Lords (and also for municipal government for London) was raised as an immediate issue while seventy-three-year-old John Bright was demanding the severe limitation of the Lord's right of veto. From this time until the passing of the Act early in 1885, Radical, Liberal and much middle-class opinion were united in one of those dramatic contests with "hereditary legislators" so dear to the hearts of nineteenth-century Liberal politicians.

Meanwhile the Socialist open-air propaganda was making some progress. Burns and Jack Williams had attracted large audiences to Hyde Park on previous Sundays. The S D F decided not to participate in the demonstration alongside the Radicals, but to set up a separate stall to advertise Socialism among the tens of thousands in the Park. Morris sent a detailed account of the events of the day to Andreas Scheu.

A dozen unemployed workers from the East End were mustered with a cart, a red flag, and a *Justice* poster, to distribute handbills, and to sell at a discount the new Manifesto of the Federation as well as the current number of the paper. The Manifesto went well, but *Justice* went more slowly. "Some dozen" members of the Federation, including Morris, Hyndman and Champion, went together to the Park, "where we had agreed to hold a meeting if we could after the Platform Meetings were over, we had no platform among the others and took no part in the procession, this as a matter of course." There they were joined by Joseph Lane and a few others of the Labour Emancipation League, with their banners and by John Burns, Jack Williams, and others of the Federation. They took their stand on a small mound, and

¹ Scheu, *op cit*, Part III, Ch. VI

Champion opened the meeting, handing over "a fairish crowd" to Hyndman, who was "pretty well received, though there was a good deal of hooting when he attacked Fawcett by name" When Burns took over, the crowd had swelled to four or five thousand, "much too big to be manageable I could clearly see"

"However Burns began very well and was a good deal cheered till in an unlucky moment he began to abuse J Bright whom of course our Franchise friends had been worshipping all day So then they fell to hooting and howling, but Burns stuck to it The malcontents began to take us in flank and shove on against the speakers, then whether our people were pushed down or whether they charged down hill I don't rightly know, but down hill they went in a lump banners and all, good-bye to the latter by the way I stuck to the hill, because I saw that some fellows seemed to be going for Burns, and . I was afraid he might be hurt so I bored through the crowd somehow and got up to him and saw a few friends about us However off the hill we were shoved in spite of our shoulders But at the bottom of the hill we managed to make a ring again and Burns began again and spoke for 3 or 4 minutes, but there was another ugly rush which broke up our ring I was insulted by one of our friends, a German of the Marylebone branch I think, telling me in his anxiety for my safety that I was *an old man* and lugging at me to get me away "

Seeing that Burns was safe, MORRIS—after making "some remarks to some of the knots of Mr Bright's lambs"—which no doubt would have been unprintable even if they had been preserved—went home. Jack Williams and one or two others "kept their ground and spoke till nightfall, departing with cheers" ¹ "I don't find our friends were either dispirited or ill-tempered at the affair but I think we ought to guard against such incidents in the future by having some organized body guard round the speaker when we speak in doubtful places" ²

The incident is full of lessons First, it shows the Socialists taking part in an important action and mustering perhaps two or three dozen firm supporters as their total strength in the heart of London—this with the assistance of the Labour Emancipation League Second, it shows the Socialists deliberately setting themselves athwart the current of feeling of working-class Liberalism, taking no part in the procession for the County Franchise—"as a matter of course"—and singling out their idols for attack by name. Like the bedraggled cock in Morris's Fable, they had

¹ *Letters*, pp 208-9

² *Ibid*, p 210

no interest in the interminable debate upon "With what Sauce shall We be Eaten?" They simply did not want to be eaten at all.

Was this tactic wise? Ought they to have taken part, alongside the Liberal working men, in a fight for the County Franchise, and the abolition of the House of Lords, and by their participation shown the way forward to the broader perspective of Socialism? Nearly every one of the Socialists who took part in the Hyde Park fray would have given an emphatic, "No". Among the pioneers at the meeting was Sam Mainwaring, an engineer and early member of the Labour Emancipation League "I was at the Hyde Park Franchise demonstration", Mainwaring later recalled, "at which John Burns referred to Bright as a silver-tongued hypocrite".

"This was enough for the radicals of that day, our banners were torn and broken up, and some of us were being run to the Serpentine for a ducking Morris fought like a man with the rest of us, and before they had taken us half way to the water we had succeeded in making a stand, and I remember Morris calling on Burns to finish his speech Being on level ground, and our opponents still fighting, Burns said he wanted something to stand on. That day we had only our first pamphlet, 'Socialism Made Plain', of which Morris had a large bag-full at his side These we placed on the ground in a heap, and Burns mounted and continued his speech, while Morris, and a dozen more of us, were fighting to keep back the more infuriated of the people Some of our friends found fault with Burns for using language to irritate the crowd, but Morris's opinion was that they would have to be told the truth, and that it was as well to tell them first as last"¹

Wise or not—what did it matter? At least it was inevitable. For thirty years the energy of the workers had been spent in stubborn and hard-fought battles for minor reforms and limited gains At the end of it, what did the early Socialists see? Depression and unemployment at home, the appalling poverty of town and country alike, the slums in the East End and the dirty imperialist wars abroad—and all this under the benevolent Cabinet of a Gladstone, and drowned in the pious rhetoric of "Progress". It was disgust with all this which had helped to bring the Socialist movement into being which made Morris refer to the Franchise Demonstration as a "tin-pot affair", and to declare

¹ *Freedom*, January, 1897

of the two political parties "I say damn Tweedle-dum and blast Tweedle-dee"¹ It is true that they underestimated the importance of the Act, which was to increase the electorate by 66 per cent But the significance of the new Socialism lay precisely in the fact that it made a sharp break with the traditional two-party "political game", and presented a revolutionary alternative to the British people Sectarianism and "leftism" were the very conditions of the new movement's birth In the next few years this was to produce an after-crop of errors and confusions But at the time the job of the Socialists seemed straightforward. it was—at long last—to "tell the truth". William Morris, because his own disgust with capitalism was so deep, and his vision of the alternative so clear, was at the heart of the movement

¹ *Letters*, p. 170 This letter to W. Allingham—which contains a reference to *Justice*—should clearly be dated 1884, and not 1883, as given by Mr. Henderson