

## CHAPTER IV

### THE SOCIALIST LEAGUE, 1885-1886 "MAKING SOCIALISTS"

#### *I The Policy of Fraud*

"There' let the peddling world go staggering by,  
Propped up by lies and vain hypocrisy,  
While here we stand amidst the scorn and hate,  
Crying aloud the certain tale of fate,  
Biding the happy day when sword, in hand,  
Shall greet the sun and bless the tortured land"<sup>1</sup>

S O MORRIS wrote in a Prologue for a social evening of the League in June, 1885 And the lines strike the authentic note of the new propaganda in 1885 and 1886—its courage in the face of growing opposition, its absolute rejection of compromise of any kind whatsoever, its mood of preparation for "the crisis" of action which would consummate the preaching of the word

This was no mood of mock-heroism To-day we can see how few and how weak the Socialists of these days were But at the time the Socialists found themselves transformed almost overnight from being an insignificant sect into being a headline bogey. In 1883 the middle classes had ignored the Socialists in 1884 they had looked upon them with detached interest or with "dry grins" But in 1885 they seemed suddenly to realize that these Socialists were in earnest and moreover that the thing the Socialists were after was THEIR PROPERTY! By 1886, when the "Trafalgar Square Riots" took place there was scarcely a grin left amongst them "Sir", wrote one gentleman to *The Times* when his mingled feelings had got the better of him after he had read a report of Jack Williams's speech in which he had regretted that the unemployed were not well enough organized to occupy the Banks, the Stock Exchange and the Government Offices without delay, "If correctly reported, Williams must be an atrocious miscreant, compared with whom Gashford in

<sup>1</sup> May Morris, II, pp 625-7, *Commonweal*, July, 1885

*Barnaby Rudge* is a virtuous person" "Sir", wrote another gentleman, demanding why the police had not done their job better, and had failed to read the Riot Act without superior orders

"When there is a kennel riot in any kennel of hounds, the huntsman and whips do not wait to get the special orders of the master, but proceed to restore order at once"<sup>1</sup>

But this was only the climax of a growing clamour of indignation. The "split" had scarcely taken place when the Socialists found real work on their hands—the welter of pious Jingoism aroused by General Gordon's death at Khartoum, the long, hammering struggle for the freedom of the streets for propaganda, the tragic plight of the unemployed. The Liberty and Property Defence League (known to Morris as the "Liberty to Plunder Defence League") was actively pursuing its aims of "resisting over-legislation, maintaining freedom of contract, and advocating individualism as opposed to Socialism, entirely irrespective of party politics". This hoary ancestor of the Economic League claimed 400,000 members and affiliates in 1885, and was dishing out pamphlets and leaflets by the thousand on the iniquities of Socialism. At its Inaugural Meeting, Lord Brabourne had let the cat out of the bag properly, declaring

"I say the more we keep property out of sight, and put liberty forward, the more likely we are to inspire the public with confidence in our action"<sup>2</sup>

So busy was it in mutilating beneficial social legislation of the mildest kind, that at the end of 1886 yet another "Fagin Gang" (as Morris called them) was set up under the name of "The Loyal and Anti-Socialist League of Great Britain and Ireland", with the Duke of Manchester, Viscount Lewisham, Lord Rosemore, Lord Poltimore and Baron De Worms as its Council, and a Guards officer as its Director. Clearly the S.D.F. and the Socialist League had succeeded in setting *something* afoot in these two years.

Nor did this attention take the form of denunciation alone. In both political parties changes were taking place. There was a sense of quickening political activity throughout the country

<sup>1</sup> *The Times*, February 11th, 1886

<sup>2</sup> L E L leaflet, *The Liberty and Property Defence League*

For every Socialist recruit, a hundred working men were taking a greater interest in Radical agitation—the Irish question, the crofters' struggle, the Georgeite propaganda, municipal government for London, abolition of the House of Lords, Disestablishment of the Church of England. The temporary recovery at the opening of the decade had given way to renewed depression, with, once again, the unemployed figures rising. In November, 1884, the German Social-Democrats greatly increased their vote, and strengthened the feeling among men of foresight in both political parties that a Socialist wind was on the way, and that the sooner they could trim their sails to it the better. Moreover, the greatly extended franchise under the Third Reform Act made the working-class vote of decisive importance.

The Socialist League had only been formed a week when Joseph Chamberlain delivered the first of his famous "New Democracy" speeches at Birmingham. The sentiments were not extreme, but there was a new emphasis on the "social question" in the national field—an extension of the vigorous reforming policy (which Chamberlain had already carried through in his own city) to the affairs of the nation as a whole. The very vagueness of some of his language opened perspectives which Morris was quick to understand.

"Every man", declared Chamberlain, "was born into the world with natural rights, with a right to a share in the great inheritance of the community, with a right to a part of the land of his birth."

"I think that we shall have to give a good deal more attention to what is called social legislation", he declared next week (January 14th) at Ipswich.

"I am certain that our Liberalism has no chance at all unless it will recognize the rights of the poor, their right to live, and their right to a fair chance of enjoying life."

Of course, the die-hards—both Whig and Tory—denounced this new "Socialism" without mercy.<sup>1</sup> But the "Tory Democrat", Lord Randolph Churchill, began to court the working class with

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the works of an anti-Socialist propagandist, H. Strickland Constable. His *Letters to Country Newspapers on Radicalism and Socialism* (Hatchards, 1886) are nearly all on the theme, "Radicalism, Socialism, and Irreligion Go Together, as a Rule". The level of argument (and its forecast of twentieth-century Fascism) is illustrated by this passage attacking Chamberlain in one of Strickland Constable's leaflets:

similar phrases. The existence of a Socialist movement—however small—was acting as one of the solvents under whose action the old political alignments were beginning to break down,<sup>1</sup> and a section of both parties was experimenting with "new looks". On the one hand, suggestions were abroad of an alliance of the Tories and the old diehard Whigs in a "patriotic" front—an alliance which, said Morris in a prophetic forecast of the twentieth-century Conservatives, "will one day take place, and will produce a party not only reactionary, but of such portentous priggishness and stupidity, that it will be of great service to the cause of the people."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Morris thought, a "new party" was in the process of slow formation, out of an alliance of Liberals, Tory Democrats and Radicals in opposition to the Socialist movement.

"Sensible men of all the *bourgeois* parties are beginning to be alarmed and to see that Parliament must not be allowed to dally with its true function of seriously considering the best means of upholding our present economical and social conditions, and of using those means in the teeth of all opposition, all sentiment.

"The party which this instinct (for such it is) will form will not deal in sensation, it will be peaceful, considerate, philanthropical, it will rally to it all 'reasonable' and 'practical' men who have to do with public matters, it will doubtless make large concessions to the cries of distress which will swell year by year, and so gather to it more and more the 'good' men of the comfortable classes, while it will put down coolly and remorselessly anything which openly wears the token of danger."<sup>3</sup>

In detail Morris may have been wrong, but his essential analysis was far-seeing and profound. Despite their tiny numbers and divisions, the Socialists had suddenly sailed from the calm

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"The Birmingham Caucus is supposed to have been instituted by men of Jewish blood. All true Englishmen call it an un-English kind of organization. Large towns are full of cunning Jews. If a sharp money-making town-dweller is called Moses, or Joseph, or Jacob, or Abraham, you may be pretty sure he is a Jew in blood more or less" (p. 163).

<sup>1</sup> See Morris's lecture, "Socialism" (October, 1885?). "The boundaries between the old parties are thrown down, the differences between the programme of the Tory and Liberal is so small that no one but a mere party man can take any interest in the contest between them, nay, the very Radicals whose name was once used for frightening babies with, are at this moment finding it difficult to get out a programme which shall distinguish them from the Tories." (May Morris, II, p. 194).

<sup>2</sup> *Commonweal*, July, 1885.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* September Supplement, 1885.

harbour of theory into the choppy seas of political intrigue. "The word Socialism is now freely used by Ministers and ex-Ministers, who take credit to themselves for their audacity in patronizing it before vast popular audiences", wrote Bax and Morris in October, 1885.<sup>1</sup> The Socialists had set in motion that twin mechanism, which Morris was to characterize as the Policy of Force and the Policy of Fraud (see p 540 f), by which we have been governed ever since. On the one hand, their propaganda was met with attempts at repression; on the other, they were met with concession and conciliation. By the end of the 1880s a Socialist renegade, especially a gifted working-class leader, was a man with a political future.

The Policy of Force Morris had always expected, and was ready to meet. He had read in Stepniak's *Underground Russia* of the savage means used to repress "the propaganda"; he had heard the stories of Scheu, Lessner and other refugees, the reminiscences of old Chartists; had seen the prosecution of Most. But the Policy of Fraud he dreaded from the first. With the first policy, at least the opposition was open—the workers could see who their enemies were. With the second, he knew that dissension might be sown in the workers' ranks, and reformism might take root in the Socialist movement itself.

From 1885 until the end of his life, Morris fought ceaselessly, with his pen, in lecture halls, and on the streets, against the Policy of Fraud. This is the key to both his strength and his errors during his years of leadership of the Socialist League. It is the reason for his ceaseless repetition of the essential principles of Socialism, his vision of the League as a brotherhood, united by revolutionary fervour, even holding aloof a little from the people for fear lest it should be corrupted by the encroaching of reformism. This is the keynote of his own selflessness and inflexible determination during the second phase of "the Propaganda".

"Let the cause cling  
About the book we read, the song we sing,  
Cleave to our cup and hover o'er our plate,  
And by our bed at morn and even wait" <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Preface to the Second Edition of the League Manifesto

<sup>2</sup> "Socialists at Play", May Morris, II, p 627, *Commonweal*, July, 1885

*II The Provisional Council*

The Socialist League was founded on December 30th, 1884 "Fellow Citizens", began the splendid Manifesto (see Appendix I) which Morris had drafted.

"We come before you as a body advocating the principles of Revolutionary International Socialism, that is we seek a change in the basis of Society—a change which would destroy the distinctions of classes and nationalities "

A Provisional Council was formed, whose members added their names to the Manifesto And the new party was launched—"Earth's newest planet wheeling through the night"

Not only Morris but all the Council were "in good working spirits". The wasteful wrangling, the endless suspicions of Hyndman's motives, was over and done with All were united in their aim of the "realization of complete Revolutionary Socialism", and there seemed to be nothing which would halt the onward march.

On the other hand, it is difficult to realize how inexperienced the pioneers were Not only was their theoretical reading confined to a few articles and pamphlets (with the occasional reader of the French edition of *Capital*), but there was (also) almost no writing available to them on the strategy and tactics of the workers' struggle In the Federation it had been Hyndman who, in the past year, had taken upon himself the responsibility for plotting the line of advance of the movement the opposition within the Council had not put up an alternate policy, but had criticized Hyndman's opportunism point by point. Now they found that the responsibility rested upon themselves alone But the course of political development in Britain during the previous twenty years, their own experience with the Radicals and trade unionists, made it difficult for them to conceive of the workers as a revolutionary force Morris's Manifesto was, of necessity, a Manifesto addressed to the workers, and did not arise from their demands its prevailing note was not "We, the revolutionary workers, declare ", but "They, the working-class, are the slaves of capital and ought to be revolutionaries " This note of detachment was a true reflection of the composition of the League Council.

How fitted was the Provisional Council for its responsibility? Of the signatories to the Manifesto, several were to play only a minor part in the League, and need only be mentioned in passing — W. Bridges Adams,<sup>1</sup> W. J. Clark, J. Cooper, W. Hudson,<sup>2</sup> James Mavor of Glasgow and Edward Watson E. T. Craig, by reason of his age, and Faulkner (Oxford), Maguire (Leeds) and Scheu (Edinburgh), by reason of their distance from London, were unable to take part in regular Council meetings. Even with these names subtracted, the Council appears as an able and determined group.

Heading the list were Edward and Eleanor Aveling. Dr Aveling was one of the most brilliant of the younger intellectuals who joined the movement. In 1880 he was the rising star of the Secularists, a brilliant scientist with a Fellowship at University College, London, and a member of the London School Board, for Westminster. Born in 1851, he was in 1883 already the author of nearly a score of books and pamphlets on Secularism and Darwinism. When he became converted to Socialism by studying *Capital* early in 1884, he accepted Marxism as being in the strictest sense a science. Darwin and Marx became his twin masters, the one master in biological, the other in social, science.<sup>3</sup> His understanding was schematic rather than creative. Marxism he regarded as a set of irrefutable factual discoveries in the field of economics, rather than as an historical method of analysis, to be applied with flexibility to social problems (see Appendix IV). But this tendency towards inflexibility was a less serious hindrance to the early movement than his notoriously erratic moral conduct. The facts of this unhappy matter are difficult to

<sup>1</sup> William Bridges Adams, engineer and writer, published *English Pleasure Carriages* (1837), *Railway Practice and Railway Possibilities* (1868), *Tramways for Streets and Roads* (1870), *Roads and Rails and Their Sequences, Physical and Moral* (1862). The old engineer must have been in his seventies when he joined the League, and seems to have taken no active part in its work.

<sup>2</sup> A friend of Joseph Lane, never active in the League.

<sup>3</sup> See "Scientific Socialism", *Commonweal*, April, 1885. "As Darwin was and is my master in biological science, so is Marx my master in economics, and for exactly the same reasons. Nor does it need any prophetic insight to see that as surely as the teaching of Darwin won and revolutionised the world of thought in so-called natural science, so surely the teaching of Marx is winning and will revolutionise the world of thought in social science." See also his introduction to *The Student's Marx* (Swan Sonnenschein, 1892).

establish<sup>1</sup> But one important fact cannot be birked Aveling acquired a reputation in the movement so unsavoury that not only the man himself, but also the principles which he espoused were brought under suspicion

George Bernard Shaw later wrote of Aveling as an "agreeable rascal"

"He was quite a pleasant fellow who would have gone to the stake for Socialism or Atheism, but with absolutely no conscience in his private life He seduced every woman he met, and borrowed from every man "

Shaw drew from him the character of Dubedat in *The Doctor's Dilemma*, and Edouard Bernstein, the German Social-Democrat, who was on close terms with the Avelings during these years, said that the portrait, though "somewhat retouched", was close to life<sup>2</sup> "Nearly everyone who had dealings with him," said Henry Salt, who also knew him in the early days, "even those who were on the friendliest of terms, found themselves victimized, sooner or later, by his fraudulence in money matters " In revolt against all bourgeois conventions, Aveling did not replace them by any new moral concern, but simply filled the vacuum with his own egotism and, like other "agreeable rascals" of the same sort, he ended his life as a disagreeable degenerate His self-indulgence

<sup>1</sup> Edouard Bernstein complained of the English reticence which made it difficult to track down the actual charges against Aveling When attending a social evening with the Blands, he spoke of the Avelings "there was suddenly a suspiciously unanimous chorus of praise of them 'Oh, the Avelings are very clever people,' and so forth so that it was at once clear to me that there was something in the air A judge of human nature might have blurted the question 'What's the truth about them, really? Have they murdered their children, or what?' (*My Years of Exile*, pp 203-4)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p 162 "Shaw gave Dubedat nearly all the characteristic attributes of Edward Aveling his passion for having everything of the best, the assured and shameless manner in which he borrowed, in order to pay for his pleasures, the scanty cash of even the poorest of his acquaintances, his gift of fascinating the ingenuous, and, in particular, women, by his lyrical and aesthetic affectations and flirtations these are the characteristic features of the man for whom Eleanor Marx sacrificed herself as completely in real life as Mrs Dubedat sacrificed herself for her husband in the play And the deliberate blindness and deafness of Mrs Dubedat in respect of all that was said to the detriment of her husband is precisely the counter-part of the obstinacy with which Eleanor Aveling, despite all her painful experience of her chosen comrade, continued to believe in him "



was not only at the expense of wealthy colleagues like Morris,<sup>1</sup> but also at the expense of working-class comrades. He would appear at Socialist meetings (according to one account) "extremely fashionably attired, something of a dandy, and highly supercilious." He would expect to be housed in a good hotel at the expense of the struggling movement, and was not even above such mean tricks as inviting the comrades to join him in some refreshment, selecting a costly drink for himself, and then picking upon one of the poorest in the group to foot the bill.<sup>2</sup>

In a small movement, when scandal carried far, and questions of principle are confused with questions of personality, such a man can do serious political harm. But Aveling's influence was inflated from being one of mere damage and irritation to being one of disaster and tragedy by his companionate marriage to Eleanor Marx and his consequent friendship with Frederick Engels. How was it that the youngest and most gifted daughter of Karl Marx should have married Aveling? "It is easy to set him down as a scoundrel", wrote Salt,

"but in truth he was an odd mixture of fine qualities and bad, a double-dealer, yet his duplicities were the result less of a calculated dishonesty than of a nature in which there was an excess of the emotional and artistic nature, with an almost complete lack of the moral."<sup>3</sup>

When he had left university, he had become the manager of a company of strolling players. Later, he became established as a dramatic critic (under the name, "Alec Nelson"), and he wrote several "curtain-raisers" and one-act plays. He and Eleanor were among the small circle in the late 1880s who first perceived the importance of Ibsen, and encouraged the first stirring of the "new drama" in England. There is no doubt that Aveling included within his contradictory personality exceptional ability, a good measure of courage and of artistic perception. It is likely that his personal weaknesses were exaggerated in the

<sup>1</sup> In 1895 Aveling was at least £50 (and possibly very much more) in debt to Morris (letter of Aveling to Morris, August 27th, 1895, Brit. Mus. Add. MSS. 45345).

<sup>2</sup> The anecdote is recounted in John Paton, *Proletarian Pilgrimage* (1935), p. 118, and refers to the later years of Aveling's life, when he visited Dundee. Another discreditable anecdote is in Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> H. S. Salt, *Seventy Years Among Savages*, p. 80.

malicious gossip of political enemies, and the working-class leader who knew him best, Will Thorne, wrote of his part in the early movement with admiration in his reminiscences, despite his own close knowledge of the tragic circumstances of the Avelings' last years<sup>1</sup> "How sad has life been all these years", Eleanor wrote shortly before her suicide in 1898. But there must have been much besides egotism in a character who could win (at least for a time) the friendship of Morris and of Engels, and the love which moved Eleanor to write in her last months those lines to her life-long friend, Freddie Demuth, which must serve as the only comment upon the character of Edward Aveling which any of us are justified in making

"I realize more and more, that wrong behaviour is simply a moral sickness, and that the morally healthy are not qualified to judge the condition of the morally sick. There are people who lack a certain moral sense just as others are deaf or short-sighted or are in other ways afflicted. And I begin to realize the fact that one is as little justified in blaming them for the one sort of disorder as for the other. We must strive to cure them, and if no cure is possible, we must do our best. I have learnt to perceive this through long suffering—suffering whose details I could not tell even to you—but I have learned it, and so I am endeavouring to bear all these trials as well as I can."<sup>2</sup>

No apology need be made for the role in the English Socialist movement of Eleanor Marx herself. In 1880, when Edouard Bernstein first met her, she was "a blooming young maiden of twenty-four",

"with the black hair and black eyes of her father, and an exceptionally musical voice. She was unusually vivacious, and took part, in her sensitive and emotional manner, in our discussions of party matters. With much greater devotion than her two elder sisters, Tussy, as Eleanor was called by her friends and her family, had dedicated herself to the Socialist movement."<sup>3</sup>

Her father had helped her also to a passionate regard for Shakespeare—many times the Marx family had walked from Haverstock Hill to Sadler's Wells to watch some Shakespearian play, standing in the pit, since they could rarely afford the price of a seat. In her early twenties, Eleanor had a consuming desire to be an

<sup>1</sup> Will Thorne, *My Life's Battles* (1925), *passim*.    <sup>2</sup> Bernstein, *op cit*, p. 164

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 159

actress, which she strove to hide from her father, who was already ailing and in need of attention.<sup>1</sup> After her father's death she was forced to abandon her dramatic career, and took a post in a boarding-school. She was soon active in the young movement, writing *International Notes for To-day*, helping Engels with her father's papers, and (in 1884) going on to the Council of the S.D.F. She was drawn towards Aveling, it seems, by their common work in the Cause, their shared interest in drama, his sensitive, intelligent and unconventional manners. Since Aveling was already married (although long separated from his wife) she decided to proclaim openly their free marriage. "Our union cannot be a legal one", she wrote to the young Scottish engineer, J. L. Mahon, as yet unknown to her, in order to forestall the slander of enemies.

"It is a true and real one none the less. We are doing no human being the smallest wrong. We have both felt that we were justified in setting aside all the false & really immoral bourgeois conventionalities, & I am happy to say we have received—the only thing we care about—the approbation of our friends and fellow socialists" (see Appendix II, pp. 860).

"My London is a little Paris", Engels wrote to Bernstein,<sup>2</sup> and among those who approved and defended the unorthodox arrangement from Hyndman's criticisms was William Morris. "If love, a perfect sympathy in tastes & work, & a striving for the same ends can make people happy, we shall be so," Eleanor wrote to an old friend, "Dollie" Radford.

"I feel I am doing *nothing* wrong, & only what my parents would have thought right, just as Engels does, yet I can understand that people brought up differently will think me wrong . . . You know I have the power very strongly developed of seeing things from the 'other side'."<sup>3</sup>

And it was perhaps this power, this sense of the veiled hostility

<sup>1</sup> Marx to Engels in January, 1882. "She is burning with eagerness to make for herself, as she believes she will in this way, an independent career as an artist. I would not for the world that the child should regard herself as an old man's nurse, to be sacrificed on the family altar. She is not frank, what I say is founded on observation, not on her own confession."

<sup>2</sup> Bernstein, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

<sup>3</sup> Eleanor Marx to Mrs. Ernest Radford, June 30th, 1884, Radford MSS.

of some of her acquaintances, which led her to write only three days later "I am *very* lonely, Dollie, & I never felt lonelier than I do just now "

Eleanor Marx-Aveling's future career is part of the history of the English labour movement. Hindered by her private suffering and the suspicion surrounding her husband, yet she overcame these difficulties and, with her great clarity of mind, warm and enthusiastic nature, and striking abilities as a speaker, she was to play a notable part, winning the admiration and affection of men as different as Belfort Bax and Will Thorne, Shaw and Keir Hardie. Eleanor was guilty of none of Edward Aveling's egotism or oversimplification of moral problems. The keynote of her life was in her passionate concern for true morality—for the emancipation of women, for an end to suffering and injustice, and, in personal relations, for true kindness and comradeship. "You say, dear, that you often think that by the time your life is finished you will have learned just enough to begin it well", she wrote in a characteristic letter to "Dollie" Radford on hearing the news of the death of a mutual friend in 1891.

"No . . . we must live our lives, & what we have missed, who knows? we may help others to realize . . . Though each one must work out his own salvation we can make the work perhaps a little less hard for those that shall come after . . . "

Even in her letters there comes the note of sadness, of one almost too sensitive to the misery of her times, when (in her words) "the sense of the hardness of life comes upon us almost too painfully for endurance . . . ". "The Black Country is *too* horrible", she wrote in another characteristic letter, of 1893.

"They talk of 'Christian faith' I didn't know how anyone with only *Christian* faith can bear to see & feel all this misery & not go mad. If I had not faith in Man & *this* life I could not bear to live . . . "

But in the early days of the League this sadness was scarcely present in the press of activity and the enthusiasm of the moment. Always she was to the forefront in the efforts to bring warmth into the day-to-day life of the movement. "We cannot too soon make children understand that Socialism means *happiness*", she wrote to the Council of the League when proposing a Christmas

party in 1885 "Is not Socialism the real 'new birth', & with its light will not the old darkness of the earth disappear?"<sup>1</sup> Whether in the League or in the Gasworkers' Union, she worked for no narrow objectives, but for the transformation of men and women and of their human relations, in the present and not in some distant future "Surely", she wrote to the League's Council on another occasion, "education to a Socialist means also Art Education"<sup>2</sup> And in her life yet one more answer is to be found to the jibes of those critics who try to present her father as a cantankerous and soulless German scholar.

It was largely through the Avelings that Engels maintained his contacts with the English movement. Engels, now living in his house in Regent's Park Road, was (in the eyes of one young English Socialist) "a tall, bearded, vigorous, bright-eyed and genial septuagenarian . . . hospitable, fond of good living, and blessed with a sense of humour"<sup>3</sup> He had little time to take part in English affairs. The death of Marx, in March, 1883, had thrown upon him tremendous responsibilities, and he ordered his life by strict routine "Every day, every post"—Aveling recalled after his death—"brought to his house newspapers and letters in every European language, and it was astonishing how he found time, with all his other work, to look through, keep in order, and remember the chief contents of them all"<sup>4</sup> Correspondence and polemical writings, new editions or translations of his own or Marx's books, above all, work on Marx's papers—every day these kept him busy until the small hours, with only a break for a stroll through Regent's Park after lunch, and an hour or two with a friend after his evening meal. Only on his famous Sunday evenings was his house thrown open to his friends—refugees from Germany, Russia, Austria, visitors from America and France. Bax, with his knowledge of German philosophy, was a frequent visitor at Engels's house, and entertained the table with his solemn paradoxes. Aveling, as the husband of "Tussy", was naturally

<sup>1</sup> Eleanor Marx-Aveling to Council of Socialist League, October 5th, 1885, S L Correspondence, Int Inst Soc Hist

<sup>2</sup> Eleanor Marx-Aveling to Secretary, Socialist League, March 1st, 1886, *Ibid*

<sup>3</sup> W S Sanders, *Early Socialist Days*, p 80

<sup>4</sup> "Engels at Home" in the *Labour Prophet*, September, 1895

another close friend Engels seems, in the 1880s, to have taken little notice of Aveling's reputation in private life. His own life had not been orthodox in bourgeois eyes, and, whatever rumours of Aveling's behaviour reached his ears, he seems to have passed them over as youthful vagaries, or suspected that they originated from political enemies.<sup>1</sup> Eleanor he regarded almost as his own daughter, and if Aveling was her choice, he was prepared to support her against the criticisms of society. In the 1880s he saw Aveling as a man who understood the theory of Socialism as well as any English intellectual who took an active part in the work of propaganda and whom (as "Tussy's" husband) he could take into his confidence in discussing the movement. As the letters which passed between himself, Aveling and Mahon in 1887 so clearly show, he was caught in a cleft stick (see Appendix II, p. 867) he could not dissociate himself from Aveling without disloyalty to the daughter of his closest friend.

Trivial as such a problem of personal relationship might appear, nevertheless it had a part in that complex of factors confusing the Socialist movement of the 1880s which no historian can ignore. "On account of Aveling", Bernstein recorded, "many people kept away from Engels's house."<sup>2</sup> Whether Morris was among these it is not clear. It is, on the face of it, unlikely. Morris seems to have liked Aveling well enough until 1887, and he was never a man to confuse persons with principles. "Politics makes queer bed-fellows", he said on one occasion and in the Socialist League he was prepared to work with Anarchists whose psychological make-up was quite as unbalanced as that of Aveling. Morris and Engels had discussions before the "Split", and they met on more than one occasion afterwards. Both men always spoke of each other with respect, and Engels regarded Morris's medievalism

<sup>1</sup> When accusations were brought against Aveling of "extravagant living" during his American tour (see *To-day*, May, 1887), Engels admitted to Sorge that the charges were "not altogether without foundation", and continued "The youngster has brought it all on himself through his weakness for poetic dreaming. But I have given him a good shaking up, and Tussy will do the rest. He is very gifted and useful, and thoroughly honest, but as gushing as a boy, and always inclined to some absurdity. Well, I still remember the times when I was just such a noodle" (Engels to Sorge, August 8th, 1887, *Labour Monthly*, February 1934).

<sup>2</sup> Bernstein, *op cit*, p. 202.

"with good-humoured toleration"<sup>1</sup> Both time and temperamental differences prevented their becoming intimate, and Morris did not attend Engels's Sunday evenings simply because this was his own busiest evening—either lecturing up and down the country, or at the head of his own circle at the Hammersmith Branch

One point, however, should be made clear The charge thrown at Engels by Hyndman—that the "Grand Lama of Regent's Park Road" was ceaselessly intriguing in the English movement—cannot be sustained. He did not pretend to be leading any section of the movement, or to have his own party within it For a moment, in 1885, it is true that by writing in *Commonweal* he publicly identified himself with the Socialist League But as soon as dissension appeared within the League he withdrew into the background again, taking the attitude that until the movement had become clarified and the men had become sorted out, his own intervention would only add to the conflict If he was approached for advice, no matter if the enquirer was Bax or Morris or Mahon, he was prepared to give it In his letters to the comrades abroad (and especially his personal friends) he gave his opinions on the development of the movement, and recounted sympathetically the actions of the Avelings, who followed his advice most consistently and were most closely in his confidence In general (there may have been minor exceptions), it is difficult to see how Engels could have acted more correctly, and it was only the great weight which his opinions carried which brought upon him accusations of interference Clearly, it would be absurd to suggest that, for this reason, he should have kept his lips sealed on the course of the movement around him But (inescapable as was the situation in which he was placed) it was without doubt a disaster that Aveling was so close to him, and that he should have gained the reputation of being the "leader" whom (in Bax's words) Engels wished to "foist" upon the English movement

However, the tragedy of 1898 (when the marriage ended in Aveling's treachery and Eleanor's suicide) should not be read

<sup>1</sup> *Labour Prophet*, September, 1895 See also Bernstein, *op cit*, p 206 "William Morris was, up to the time of the schism, an occasional visitor in Engels' house, and Engels always spoke of him with respect, but they never became intimate The principal reason was that Morris was the central star of a circle of his own He could only with difficulty get away on Sunday evenings" See also Mayer, *Friedrich Engels* (1936), p 270

back into the events of the 1880s. Stories discreditable to Aveling were, it is true, circulating even before the "Split" but some were slanders, kept afloat by enemies among the Secularists, and these threw suspicion upon the truth of the others.<sup>1</sup> When, in the autumn of 1886, the Avelings made a lecture tour of America, scandal surrounded it, but once again of a vague nature. Morris, who detested all personal scandal, made no reference to any of these matters in his letters. Until 1887 he valued the Avelings as among the best comrades in the leadership of the League. Month by month Eleanor contributed her record of the international movement to *Commonweal*, her own contacts and those of Engels being drawn upon to the full. Aveling shared the editorship of the paper with Morris for the first year, and Morris admired his command of Scientific Socialism, both as a lecturer and writer.<sup>2</sup> The Avelings took part in the struggle for free speech at Dod Street, and it was Morris's protest at the rough-housing of Eleanor which led to his arrest. Both Eleanor and Edward Aveling addressed public meetings of the League, and took their share in the open-air propaganda. On their departure to America they resigned from the League Council and wrote no more for *Commonweal*, and on their return the parliamentary question was already a keen subject of dispute. This political issue, rather than personal matters, may account for the coldness growing up between Morris and the Avelings in 1887,<sup>3</sup> although it cannot account for Morris's angry reference to Aveling, in September, 1887, as a "disreputable dog".

Two others of the Provisional Council were frequent visitors at Engels's house—old Frederic Lessner, the survivor of 1848 (see p. 355), and E. Belfort Bax. Bax's introduction to the Socialist movement has already been described. From his pen came the first serious critiques by an English Marxist of a score of

<sup>1</sup> Bax, *op cit*, p. 109, says that in the early days a story went round that cheques were continually being drawn by Morris in Aveling's favour. This story being proved false, it enhanced Aveling's credit in other quarters.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Morris to "George" Burne-Jones, February, 1885, recounts with admiration Aveling's handling of a rowdy student audience at Oxford (*Letters*, pp. 231-2).

<sup>3</sup> In his *Socialist Diary*, in January, 1887, Morris records "At the Council of the Socialist League in the evening the Avelings there mighty civil, but took no part in the proceedings" (Brit. Mus. Add. MSS. 45335).



problems in religion, ethics, and social morality. In the years between 1885 and 1895 he published *The Religion of Socialism*, *The Ethics of Socialism*, *Outlooks From the New Standpoint* and *Outspoken Essays*, as well as some studies in the French Revolution and half a hundred articles in Socialist periodicals. In addition, he was ready to give every service required of him (mostly in a literary capacity) to the movement, and it should be said that his own ridiculously solemn *Reminiscences*, written in later life, by no means do justice to his own youthful enthusiasm and devotion to the Cause. In particular, all the work he did in collaboration with Morris was of a high order, especially the series of articles in *Commonweal*, "Socialism From the Root Up" (see Appendix IV, p. 893), while he did a fine job of work in the early days of the League in his articles exposing and analysing Imperialism.<sup>1</sup> May Morris has given a warm picture of Bax and her father at work together on their editorial duties in the study at Kelmscott House

"Bax with his fine regular features and bushy moustache tall and thin, in his black velvet coat, sitting in a comfortable armchair by the fire, smoking, with perhaps a glass at his elbow my Father short and square and blue-clad, sitting at the writing-table, his splendid head bent over the paper, with perhaps a dry grin on his face at a vagary of Bax's—it was thus they did the *Commonweal* make-up."<sup>2</sup>

But—the truth must come out—there was something funny about Belfort Bax

The truth of the matter is that Bax was an owl. There was a good deal in him of the music-hall professor—the sudden fits of utter abstraction, the completely unpractical cast of mind, the essential lack of proportion which revealed itself in a blank absence of the sense of humour. His best work was done when Morris was at his elbow to bring him down to earth with a bang out of his naive ruminations. Bax alone of the early Marxists (if we except Morris) seemed to have a really flexible understanding of the historical method of Marxism in its relevance to all branches

<sup>1</sup> Among Bax's early articles on Imperialism for *Commonweal* were "Imperialism v Socialism" (February, 1885), "Gordon and the Soudan" (March, 1885), "At Bay!" (April, 1885), "British Foreign Policy" (June, 1885), "The Congo" (August, 1885). Further articles appeared in 1886 and 1887.

<sup>2</sup> May Morris, II, p. 173

of human behaviour and thought. But, time and again, his pronouncements seem to be strangely off the point. It is as if the real bull's-eye of his target was the Victorian middle-class family and nineteenth-century religious phenomena while the facts of capitalist exploitation and imperialism were somewhere in the outer rings. "We defy any human being", he declared,

"to point to a single reality, good or bad, in the composition of the *bourgeois* family. It has the merit of being the most perfect specimen of the complete sham that history has presented to the world. There are no holes in the texture through which reality might chance to peer."<sup>1</sup>

His articles on imperialism kept on plunging off after the spectacle of hypocrisy, rather than the fact of exploitation. When the Trafalgar Square Riots took place Morris—on the front page of *Commonweal*—was wrestling with the essential political implications of the outbreak (see p. 484), while in the inner pages Bax was having the time of his life using the incident as a text for a very long and triumphant article on the importance of the event as an "exposure of the abject cowardice of the English middle-classes *en bloc*." The opening paragraph will serve as a fairly good example of the difficulties of his style.

"Nothing strikes the Bourgeois mind with a keener sense of horror than the 'lamentable', (as he calls it) destruction of property. Misery and starvation in times like the present, are part of the natural order of things, very unfortunate, very deplorable, perhaps, but inevitable, and even useful as affording the well-to-do classes an opportunity of posing as the charitable benefactors of the distressed. Besides, is not the traditional founder of that religion which is often described as one of the bulwarks of our 'social order', reported to have given utterance to the dictum, 'the poor ye have always with you'? But the fracture of plate-glass windows, the destruction or alienation of respectable tradesmen's stock, and in a wholesale manner too, no this verily is not in the bond which knits society together, this is entirely out of the nature of Bourgeois law and order, and hence to be bewailed as a calamity."<sup>2</sup>

It is difficult not to feel that there is a taste of provocative arm-chair jeering here. It is typical of Bax that he should spice his first paragraph with a jibe at Christianity. The sentiments he expresses are fair enough, but the heavy, detached irony and the obscure mannerisms of style—"given utterance to the dictum",

<sup>1</sup> *The Religion of Socialism*, p. 141.

<sup>2</sup> *Commonweal*, March, 1886, Article, "Looting, Scientific and Unscientific".

"alienation" (for looting), etc —was hardly of service to the movement at a time when the Socialists in the face of a chorus, of abuse, were trying to make their viewpoint unmistakably clear.

This lack of proportion in Bax's outlook sometimes took ludicrous forms. Where Morris could suggest his disgust of the philistinism and joylessness of the middle class in a few savage strokes of the pen, the subject had for Bax a peculiar sort of fascination. It assumed in his mind far more prominence than the suffering and intellectual deprivations of the working class. Again and again he returned to the subject, as if poking about among some noisome rubbish with a long stick and a pained expression. Consequently the merest human foible or trivial example of philistinism became under his hyper-rationalistic approach a subject for denunciation. He could write two whole pages on the bourgeois use of the word "damn." He inspected bourgeois conventions in the light of a solemn and literal child-like reason, as if he were analysing the habit of some species of beetle or slug. His method of approach shared the errors of the most solemn school of contemporary American sociology. Instead of assessing the real importance of each convention within the context of class oppression (as Morris did), Bax appeared to regard them all of equal importance in the light of the superior standard of literal reason. Consequently, he took up an attitude to the "Woman Question" which Engels, Morris, and most of his contemporary Socialists could only find laughable. "Looked at from the ordinary point of view", he said (and it is worth taking notice of this suggestion of an "ordinary", extra-class, rationalist, viewpoint)

"It is quite clear that considering the fact that the female population of England is in excess of the male by about a million, female suffrage, in spite of its apparent embodiment of the principle of equality, really means, if it means anything at all (which may be doubtful) the handing over of the complete control of the state to *one sex*."<sup>1</sup>

In repeated writings and conversations he rode this hobby-horse of the Bourgeois raising "the female sex into a quasi-privileged class", conjuring up farcical copy for Thurber's *War Between Man and Woman*, commiserating the working man,

<sup>1</sup> *The Religion of Socialism*, p. 117

"whose wife, to all intents and purposes, now has him completely in her power. If dissolute or drunken, she can sell up his goods or break up his home at pleasure, and still compel him to keep her and live with her to her life's end. There is no law to protect *him*. On the other hand, let him but raise a finger in a moment of exasperation against this precious representative of the sacred principle of 'womanhood', and straightway he is consigned to the treadmill." <sup>1</sup>

This "monomania" did not prevent Bax doing fine work for the Cause. It did mean that he could always be counted upon to get his teeth firmly into a side issue at critical moments and that he was not the sort of man to inspire the respect of the workers in the League with his practicality. Certainly, it did not make for any breach between him and Morris. On the contrary, Morris rejoiced in Bax's foibles.<sup>2</sup> Bax's own *Reminiscences* enshrine a number of ludicrous leg-pulls at his expense, which he evidently believed to his dying day to be the literal truth. One story which Bax records as an example of Morris's "solicitude for his friend's safety and welfare" ought to be mentioned before we take Bax's leave.

"Once, during a few days' walking tour in Sussex", Bax relates, "somewhere between Pulborough and Midhurst, we were passing through some fields by the side of a stream. Suddenly Morris became morose and unsociable in manner. A little while after again coming upon the highroad we turned into an inn for luncheon. Sitting after the meal, I asked Morris the reason of his grumpiness. He replied that he was much exercised in passing through those fields in that he saw bulls regarding us in a more or less menacing manner, and that although he himself could have escaped by swimming across the little river, knowing that I could not swim, he was perplexed as to what course to pursue in the event of a bovine attack. Hence his surliness."<sup>3</sup>

One can imagine the wretched Morris, bored to distraction by some interminable disquisition by Bax on the Woman Question or the Bourgeois Family Christmas, beguiling his imagination by

<sup>1</sup> *The Religion of Socialism*, p. 116

<sup>2</sup> When a woman fell off Clifton Suspension Bridge without breaking her neck, Bax (to Morris's delight) pointed out in all seriousness that this proved that woman was a lower organism, man would have been killed (May Morris, II, p. 174). See also the anecdotes in Lee, *op cit*, p. 83. Lee relates "If Bax was present when funny stories were passing round, we would wait expectantly for him to put a question at the end of each tale as the funniest part of the fun."

<sup>3</sup> Bax, *Reminiscences and Reflexions*, p. 120

the vision of the "philosopher of the party" as the sudden victim of a "bovine attack", and turning his vision to good account when an explanation of his abstraction was demanded

Of the other members of the Provisional Council, there is less to be recorded—not because their role was to be unimportant, but because they left fewer reminiscences behind them. John Lincoln Mahon, the young Edinburgh engineer, and Joseph Lane, the founder of the Labour Emancipation League, have already been introduced. Sam Mainwaring, an engineer with a "quiet, dignified bearing", was also an early member of the L E L. "He was full-bearded, like Morris", recalled Tom Mann. "After attending propagandist meetings William Morris frequently walked back with Mainwaring, and it was said of them that they looked like the skipper and the first mate of a ship."<sup>1</sup> Charles Mowbray, who was imprisoned in 1887 after an unemployed demonstration at Norwich, and, later, came to play a dubious role on the Anarchist wing of the movement, seems to have left little record of his own introduction to Socialism.

Thomas Binning was a London compositor, and a trade unionist of twenty years' standing in 1885. He became employed full-time by the League on the publication of *Commonweal*, and, later, he was Father of the Chapel at the Kelmscott Press. In 1885 and 1886 he was the League's foremost propagandist on trade union questions. His articles were forcible and well-argued, with due attention to matters of detail. He showed the skilled trade unionists how the existence of the great mass of poorly-paid unskilled was a threat to their own conditions, and pointed the moral.

"Only by lifting up our poorer brethren can we hope permanently to better our own condition. Hitherto we have been fighting in groups, sometimes carelessly selfishly indifferent to the fate of our fellows. It is time we began to see in every worker a comrade, and to close up our ranks."<sup>2</sup>

He put forward the positive demand of the Socialist Leaguers for a great Federation of trade unions, united by the common aim of Socialism. But at the same time his bitter antagonism to the policy of the leaders of the old craft unions (the privileged "benefit societies"), made certain negative attitudes become

<sup>1</sup> Tom Mann, *op cit*, p. 47

<sup>2</sup> *Commonweal*, May Supplement, 1885

prominent in his outlook, from which he did not shake free until the "new unionism" was already under way "Let us no longer waste our strength and resources in isolated, costly, and futile attempts to better ourselves by striking for a few pence . . .", he urged his fellow-workers. This became the general plea of the Socialist League, and of William Morris himself there must either be a great General Strike movement, with the objective of Socialism, or nothing Capitalism, and not the individual employer, must be seen as the real enemy, and therefore—argued Binning—any merely local fights should be avoided

"Fellow-unionists, our proper place is shoulder to shoulder with those who are educating, agitating and organising, not to obtain some trifling concession from the monopolists, but to utterly destroy the capitalistic vampire, the sole cause of the poverty, degradation and misery of the workers" <sup>1</sup>

Frank Kitz was even more of a "veteran" of the movement than was Joseph Lane indeed, in the early 1870s, he was once accused of being "the only Socialist in London" <sup>2</sup> His part in these years, and his association with Johann Most and the Rose Street Club, has already been noted (see p 324) He was (recalled Glasier) "a rebel by temperament rather than Anarchist by philosophy" A dyer, who was sometimes employed at Morris's Merton Abbey Works, a bold and humorous open-air speaker—"a bluff, breezy chap, fond of his beer and jolly company".<sup>3</sup> As the only English member of the Rose Street Club with a fluent command of German, he had been in the thick of this strange atmosphere of international conspiracy at the end of the 1870s. According to one account, in the early 1880s he had formed a small circle for the making of explosives In the first years of the League, Kitz was ebullient and impetuous, "a fine burly figure, with a mass of light brown curly hair, blue eyes, rather heavy features, a pleasant, jolly smile" <sup>4</sup> His occasional contributions to the *Commonweal* are full of wrath against the capitalist class, and equally full of detailed knowledge of the real misery of the people of East London Unlike Lane, who could

<sup>1</sup> *Commonweal*, September Supplement, 1885

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, August Supplement, 1885

<sup>3</sup> Glasier, *op cit*, p 128

<sup>4</sup> Obituary notice signed "J M" (probably J L Mahon) in *Justice*, January 20th, 1923

present his case clearly and tersely, Kitz was muddled and hit out instinctively in every direction. More than one of his articles, detailing the iniquities of the system, ends with an open cry for vengeance.<sup>1</sup> "I have made Kitz's acquaintance lately", Morris wrote to Joynes early in 1885

"Like most of our East-enders, he is certainly somewhat tinged with anarchism or perhaps one may say destructivism, but I like him very much. I called on the poor chap at the place where he lived, and it fairly gave me the horrors to see how wretchedly off he was, so it isn't much to wonder at that he takes the lines he does."<sup>2</sup>

This "destructivist" tinge to the views of Kitz, Lane and their following in the Labour Emancipation League, was to prove of increasing importance within the Socialist League. Extreme individualism—the desire to dispense with party discipline and serious forms of organization—they inherited in part from the advanced democratic movement of previous decades. The workers' struggle against the machinery of the bourgeois State had passed, among some of Bronterre O'Brien's followers, into a struggle against the State itself—the police, law courts, Parliament—as instruments of coercion and class rule. In the late 1870s the misery of the East End, and the apathy to their attempts at propaganda, had made the methods of the Nihilists in Russia, and the threats uttered by Most over the bar at the Rose Street Club, seem an effective—even a realistic—way of striking at capitalism. Such men as Kitz were impatient to find a short-cut to Socialism, and hoped that agitation in the slums and among the unemployed might provoke a revolutionary uprising as overwhelming as their visions of the Paris Commune. If they preached vengeance to the oppressed, naked class hatred to the exploited, the thing would be done. "palliatives" and talk of Parliament were mere trifling.

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Kitz's article, "Bastille, Bourgeoise, and Bumble", in *Commonweal*, November, 1885. "Let others talk of evolution and development, but I shall see with pleasure the dawn of a day of reckoning with these cowardly, cruel ill-treaters of the poor. Those who are attracted to us from a sheer love of notoriety may deprecate a cry for revenge. But the Socialist who works for the time when the worker's evening of life shall be passed in the enjoyment of what he has earned cannot forego the desire to reckon with those who bring the worker's grey hairs in sorrow to the grave."

<sup>2</sup> Morris to Joynes, February 3rd, 1885, Brit Mus Add MSS 45345

The presence of some of these attitudes in the minds of such men as Joseph Lane and Frank Kitz helps to explain why the League was later to become a nursing-ground for Anarchism. It helps to explain why the League was launched with a marked list to the Left, in contrast to Hyndman's list to the opportunism of the Right—why, when Morris shifted his weight towards the Anarchist side, the list at once became dangerous—and why, when he removed his influence altogether, the acrobatics of the rest of the crew soon had the craft capsized. But, while several of the Leaguers had a slight knowledge of Anarchist theory,<sup>1</sup> it would be wrong to think of the "Anarchists" within the League in 1885 and 1886 as the conscious advocates of certain theoretical principles. They were class-conscious workers in revolt against intolerable conditions, hostile to Hyndman's top hat and frock coat, earnest in their desire to get a real revolutionary propaganda afoot, and attracted to William Morris by his own enthusiasm and his evident hatred of the middle class. Years afterwards—despite the fact that Morris, in his last years, broke decisively with them—both Frank Kitz (see p. 822) and Joseph Lane paid warm tributes to his memory. William Morris had "none of the meanness and bitterness which the horrible competitive system implants in all of us", wrote Lane—with perhaps a self-critical glance at his own quarrelsome part in the early movement. "Morris was one of nature's noblemen, and I never expect to see his like again."<sup>2</sup>

### *III The League's Policy*

The weeks immediately following the "Split" were ones of confusion within the movement. The Provisional Council, installed in their new premises, found themselves without a membership—without even a list of the Secretaries of the Branches of the S.D.F.<sup>3</sup> Within a few weeks firm affiliations could be

<sup>1</sup> In the recollection of the late Mr. Ambrose Barker, Joseph Lane and his circle were aware of the writings of Kropotkin, Bakunin, and of Benjamin Tucker, in America, as early as 1885.

<sup>2</sup> Lane to Ambrose Barker, 1912, Nettlau Collection, Int. Inst. Soc. Hist.

<sup>3</sup> J. L. Mahon's first action as Secretary of the League was to write (December 31st, 1884) to the S.D.F. requesting a list of their Branch Secretaries' addresses. S.L. Correspondence, Int. Inst. Soc. Hist.



recorded from several London branches, from the Labour Emancipation League, the Scottish (Edinburgh) Land and Labour League, and Branches at Leeds and Oxford. Several Council members urged the League to embark forthwith on a struggle to win over or destroy the remaining S D F Branches. Scheu called for a Manifesto denouncing "the party of Jingoism and Boss-ship at Westminster"<sup>1</sup> Hyndman and the rump of the S D F. Executive issued a stereotyped statement of their case, and from Leeds on January 11th, 1885, Tom Maguire sent a desperate plea for a "counterblast" from the League.

"Our work is at a standstill. The confidence of our members is necessarily growing weaker and the whole movement cannot be other than in a state of compromise. A dignified silence just now counts for nothing against the Jesuitical activities of pronounced opponents."<sup>2</sup>

On the next day Scheu wrote again to criticize the "plan of letting the present branches of the S D F alone" "Why should you let Hyndman have the Branches or even their names to puff himself up with?"<sup>3</sup> In response to this pressure a dignified statement was issued on January 13th, over the names of the ten resigning members of the S D F Executive.

The delay in issuing this statement was not only due to the scruples of Morris (and, most probably, of the Avelings) against carrying on a public dog-fight within the movement. It was due, at least in part, to differences among the Provisional Council as to the actual questions of principle involved in the "Split" and as to the policy of the new body. Morris's first public statement (in an interview with the *Daily News*, January 8th, 1885) would probably, it is true, have won the assent of all the Provisional Council. He stressed his view that the new party must be a party of *cadres*, with a high level of theoretical understanding, ready to play a leading part in any revolutionary movement of the masses. The occasion for the split, he said, was Hyndman's "arbitrary rule" and tendency to "political opportunism tinctured

<sup>1</sup> Scheu to Provisional Council, January 4th, 1885, S L Correspondence, Int Inst Soc Hist

<sup>2</sup> Tom Maguire to Secretary, S L, January 11th, 1885, S L Correspondence, Int Inst Soc Hist

<sup>3</sup> Scheu to Secretary S L, January 12th, 1885, S L Correspondence, Int Inst Soc Hist

with Jingoism" The League took its stand for revolutionary and scientific Socialism, as opposed to this opportunism on the one hand, and to reformism on the other

"There are many people who will admit the justice of the Socialistic criticisms of the present state of society, and are prepared to do all they can for the working classes that can be done for the working classes and not by them",

he said Hyndman's methods—he implied—would bring about a "mechanical revolution" By contrast with this—

"I want an educated movement Discontent is not enough, though it is natural and inevitable The discontented must know what they are aiming at My belief is that the old order can only be overthrown by force, and for that reason it is all the more necessary that the revolution should be, not an ignorant, but an intelligent revolution What I should like to have now, far more than anything else, would be a body of able, high-minded, competent men, who should act as instructors of the masses and as their leaders during critical periods of the movement It goes without saying that a great proportion of these instructors and organizers should be working men I should like to see 2,000 men of that stamp engaged in explaining the principles of rational, scientific Socialism all over the kingdom "

In the absence of a genuine mass movement, the first two watch-words of the League—"Educate! Agitate!"—were bound to take precedence over the third, "Organize!" "The whole movement here is only a phantom", Engels was to write to Sorge in January, 1886, "but if it is possible to draw into the Socialist League a kernel of people who have a good theoretical understanding, much will be gained for a genuine mass movement, which will not be long in coming " Morris would have assented to this judgement

On the other hand, in the statement issued by the seceding members of the S D F Executive on January 13th, several phrases foreshadow future differences within the League The occasion for the "Split" is described in the same terms—Hyndman's arbitrary rule, political opportunism and adventurism, jingoism—but the conclusion drawn is sharper than in previous statements The tendency to opportunism is denounced on the grounds that it "would have involved us in alliances, however temporary, with one or other of the political factions, and would have weakened our propagandist force by driving us into electioneering", which might, in turn, have deprived the movement of

some of their leaders, "by sending them to our sham parliament, there to become either nonentities, or perhaps our masters, and it may be our betrayers"<sup>1</sup> Once again the educational role of the propaganda is stressed, the importance of building up a party of *cadres*, but—once again—in sharper terms

"Our view is that such a body in the present state of things has no function but to educate the people in the principles of Socialism, and to organize such as it can get hold of to take their due places, when the crisis shall come which will force action on us"

This phrasing, increasingly to be repeated in Morris's writings, is worth some attention. The revolutionary movement is looked upon from two aspects. a small educated propaganda on the one hand, a spontaneous rising provoked by misery on the other. in the final event "the crisis" arises—one sharply-defined revolutionary moment (like the Commune)—when the Socialist *cadres* will master the spontaneous mass movement and steer it through to Socialism. This statement can be seen to foreshadow the two major confusions in which Morris was involved in the next five years.

First, there is the old bone of contention—the falsely formulated opposition between "palliatives" and "purism" For some time Morris had been hawing in doubt over this question. Now his attitude crystallized very rapidly on the "purist" side. Just as Binning was advising the trade unionists to abandon the struggle for limited local gains, and concentrate all their efforts in the Great Strike for Socialism, so Morris adopted the same attitude in general political questions. He overlooked the importance of educating the masses of the workers in Socialist theory by taking part in successive struggles for the improvement of their own conditions. the primary object of the propaganda must be the preparation of the workers for the moment of "the crisis".

Shortly after the "Split", the Provisional Council adopted a draft Constitution, which almost certainly was brought forward by the Avelings and represented Engels's view as to the correct policy of the League:

<sup>1</sup> The Statement, published as a leaflet, is reprinted in full in Tom Mann, *op cit*, pp 45-6

"1 Forming and helping other Socialist bodies to form a National and International Socialist Labour Party

"2 Striving to conquer political power by promoting the election of Socialists to Local Governments, School Boards, and other administrative bodies

"3 Helping Trade-Unionism, Co-operation, and every genuine movement for the good of the workers

"4 Promoting a scheme for the National and International Federation of Labour"<sup>1</sup>

The preamble included the sentence "While fully sympathizing with and helping every effort of the wage-earners to win better conditions of life under the present system, the Socialist League aims at abolishing the Capitalist and Landlord class"

But even this sentence was excluded from the preamble to the Constitution adopted at the First Annual Conference in July, 1885, while the Programme was totally revised

The rejection of this Constitution is an indication of the defeat of the Avelings on the Provisional Council, and the complete conversion of William Morris to the "purist" and anti-parliamentary position. As early as February, 1885, J. L. Mahon, as Secretary of the League, informed the Leeds Branch that joining the League involved renouncing "the political opportunism and State Socialism of the S D F",<sup>2</sup> and, it was implied, the renunciation of parliamentary or local electioneering. In July, 1885, Morris defined his own position in *Commonweal*:

"The regular course of Parliamentary legislation acts like a doctor trying to heal his patient by attacking the symptoms and letting the cause of the disease alone. For the purpose for which it is intended, the support of the class-state, Parliamentary legislation is valid, otherwise it is a delusion.

"I should like our friend to understand whither the whole system of palliation tends—namely, to the creation of a new middle class to act as a buffer between the proletariat and their direct and obvious masters, the only hope of the bourgeois for retarding the advance of Socialism

<sup>1</sup> This Constitution, provisionally adopted after the Split, was dropped from the revised Constitution adopted at the First Annual Conference. Later, it reappears in the North of England Socialist Federation (see p. 551) and the Hoxton Labour Emancipation League (see p. 598). A copy is preserved in the British Library of Political and Economic Science.

<sup>2</sup> Report of J. L. Mahon to the Provisional Council, February 8th, 1885, S. L. Correspondence, Int. Inst. Soc. Hist.

lies in this device Let our friend think of a society thus held together Let him consider how sheepishly the well-to-do workers to-day offer themselves to the shearer, and are we to help our masters to keep on creating fresh and fresh flocks of sheep? What a society that would be, the main support of which would be capitalists masquerading as working men! Shall the ultimate end of civilization be the perpetual widening of the middle classes? I think if our friend knew as well as I do the terrible mental degradation of our middle classes, their hypocrisy, their cowardice, their joylessness, it would scare him from attempting to use their beloved instrument of amelioration—Parliament

"It is a new Society that we are working to realise, not a cleaning up of our present tyrannical muddle into an improved smoothly-working form of that same "order", a mass of dull and useless people organized into classes, amidst which the antagonism should be moderated and veiled so that they should act as checks on each other for the insurance of the stability of the system

"The real business of Socialists is to impress on the workers the fact that they are a class, whereas they ought to be Society, if we mix ourselves up with Parliament we shall confuse and dull this fact in people's minds instead of making it clear and intensifying it The work that lies before us at present is to *make Socialists*, to cover the country with a network of associations composed of men who feel their antagonism to the dominant classes, and have no temptation to waste their time in the thousand follies of party politics If by chance any good is to be got out of the legislation of the ruling classes, the necessary concessions are much more likely to be wrung out of them by fear of such a body, than they are to be wheedled and coaxed out of them by the continual life of compromise which 'Parliamentary Socialists' would be compelled to live, and which is deadly to that feeling of exalted hope and brotherhood that alone can hold a revolutionary party together"<sup>1</sup>

Morris's position was similar to that of the "left" workers in the League, such as Lane, Kitz and Mainwaring. Where their experience of the bitter poverty and apathy of the East End had led them to despair of transforming the State machine, Morris's profound moral disgust with the middle class had led him to the same conclusion. Their "terrible mental degradation" is set forward as a more fundamental argument than any analysis derived from the social or economic condition of the workers, and, just like Lane and Kitz, Morris's attitude to "palliatives" and to "Parliament" seems to be deeply coloured by a feeling of the possible imminence of the "crisis", a desire to take a short cut, and force the revolution to the earliest possible decision.

<sup>1</sup> "Socialism and Politics", July Supplement, 1885

Morris's second major confusion—that of "anti-parliamentarianism"—was in his view the logical conclusion which followed from his rejection of "palliatives." To partake in parliamentary activity, indeed, would be to sanction the largest "palliative" of all.<sup>1</sup> This issue was later to prove the main cause of dissension in the League. But in 1885 and 1886 (while it was often debated) there seemed to be little danger that it would tear the League apart. Nevertheless, even if the members of the Council agreed to differ on this issue, the attitude to political action held by the majority was bound to determine the character of their propaganda. Rather than participating in the day-to-day struggles of the workers, or taking an active part in the trade unions, co-operatives, Radical Clubs, or other existing popular organizations, the majority of the Leaguers felt their first and only duty to be to preach the straight message of Socialism by means of the written and spoken word. It is therefore not surprising that none of the struggles waged by the League during this period were centred on industrial questions but, rather, that they were conducted on the issues of Imperialism and the right to conduct propaganda itself.

#### IV *Fighting Imperialism*

Morris possessed to the full his own share of the historical sense, which he called "the new sense of modern times."<sup>2</sup> His Socialist poems were consciously the poems of the pioneers of a new world. He knew that the trivial or serious episodes of the early Socialists would at some time be a subject of history. And towards the end of 1887 he set down some hurried "Notes on Propaganda" as a guide to the future historian. It is interesting to see the events which he singled out as important.

"The propaganda went on briskly", the sheet of notes begins. "On the First of February 1885 appeared the first number of the *Commonweal*. In the March number appeared an admirable article by F. Engels—which attracted much attention. The wretched commercial-piratical war in the Soudan drew our attention somewhat at this

<sup>1</sup> Of course, it did not necessarily follow that hostility to "palliatives" and anti-parliamentarianism went together, as Hyndman's opinions and career illustrate.

<sup>2</sup> From Morris's Preface to Robert Steele's *Medieval Lore* (1893) (reprinted in May Morris, I, pp. 286-9).

time      A series of lessons on Socialism explaining the works of Carl Marx were given during these months "<sup>1</sup>

The first number of the *Commonweal* was indeed an event of importance. In contrast to *Justice*, the paper was declared to be "The Official Organ of the Socialist League", the Editor and Sub-Editor (Morris and Aveling) acting "as delegates of the Socialist League, and under its direct control".<sup>2</sup> The first number carried the Manifesto, articles by Bax, Aveling, Lane, and Craig, Eleanor Aveling's "Record of the International Movement", news of the movement in Britain, and Morris's "March of the Workers"

"Hark the rolling of the thunder!  
Lo the sun' and lo, thereunder  
Riseth wrath, and hope, and wonder,  
And the host comes marching on "

The second number, in March, must surely have been one of the most remarkable issues of any British Socialist periodical. An Editorial by Morris, articles by Bax, Stepniak, George Bernard Shaw, Paul Lafargue, Frank Kitz and Aveling were capped by three outstanding items. Eleanor Marx-Aveling's "Record" included messages greeting the formation of the League from Bebel, Liebknecht, Vaillant, Lafargue, Leo Frankel, Kautsky, Pierre Lavroff, Stepniak and Domela Nieuwenhuis. Morris contributed his "Message of the March Wind", one of the most moving of all his Socialist poems, which was to serve as the prelude to *The Pilgrims of Hope* and Engels contributed his remarkable article, "England in 1845 and in 1885", which was later included in his Preface to the English edition of *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*.

It is unfortunate that Engels was not able to contribute more frequently to *Commonweal*.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, this article had a very

<sup>1</sup> Brit Mus Add MSS 46345

<sup>2</sup> See editorial note by Morris in reply to correspondence, *Commonweal*, May 1st, 1886 "The *Commonweal* is called the 'official' organ of the League, because the Editors are responsible to it for the whole conduct of the paper, are appointed by the League, who have the power of making them amend or repudiate in the name of the League anything that seems to militate against our principles "

<sup>3</sup> Engels's contributions to *Commonweal* were limited to the article, "England in 1845 and 1885" (March, 1885) and "How Not to Translate Marx" (November, 1885). The latter article, while important as a thorough debunking of the

marked influence upon Morris, as his references to it, and the echoes of it in his articles and lectures of 1885 and 1886 reveal. In his article Engels traced the causes of the decline of Chartism and Socialist organization in England to the supremacy of British capitalism in the world market between 1850 and 1875, showed how these conditions gave birth to a skilled aristocracy of labour protected by strong Trade Unions, while leaving the East End as "an ever-spreading pool of stagnant misery and desolation, of starvation when out of work, and degradation, physical and moral, when in work" Even the masses of the workers, Engels argued, had benefited in limited and temporary ways from Britain's industrial monopoly "with the breakdown of that monopoly the English working-class will lose that privileged position", the article concluded "And that is the reason why there will be Socialism again in England"

"War in the world abroad a thousand leagues away,  
While custom's wheel goes round and day devoureth day  
Peace at home!—what peace, while the rich man's mill is strife,  
And the poor is the grist that he grindeth, and life devoureth life!"<sup>1</sup>

so wrote Morris And in many articles and lectures Bax and Morris drew the implications from these facts, and pointed clearly to the new character of British imperialism<sup>2</sup> Lecturing at Oldham in July, 1885, on "The Depression of Trade", Morris based his argument upon Engels's article

"Here in Lancashire you have allowed yourselves to be so hoodwinked and enslaved that you are forced to live amidst squalor and wretchedness . . . in order that you may make wares of whose sale you are now beginning to have doubts With all the lines of competing railways that score the land like the crackling on a leg of pork, tons upon tons

"translation" appearing in *To-Day of Capital* over the pseudonym of "J Broadhouse" was too detailed to have had much influence upon the rank and file of the League There is also a very brief note by Engels (on the subject of the translation of "Socialism Utopian and Scientific") in the paper for November 13th, 1886

<sup>1</sup> *Pilgrims of Hope* Section 3

<sup>2</sup> Engels pointed the way, in one sentence of the article, whose implicit moral judgement—in the use of the word "civilization"—chimes in exactly with Morris's use of the same word "New markets are getting scarcer every day, so much so that even the negroes of the Congo are now to be forced into the civilization attendant upon Manchester calicoes, Staffordshire pottery, and Birmingham hardware"



of fish, wholesome, nay dainty food, if it could only be brought to the consumer, are scattered for manure over the fields of Suffolk and Norfolk while people in the East End of London are becoming scarcely human for lack of decent food, and the fishermen of East Anglia risk their lives in cockleshells of boats on the sea living roughly and precariously for the noble reward of 12s a week "

For many years, he pointed out, Britain had followed the policies of economic imperialism:

"We have said, 'Buy this or—take a bayonet in your belly' People don't want the goods we offer them, but they are poor and have to buy something which serve their turn anyhow, so they accept Their own goods, made slowly and at a greater cost, are driven out of the market, and the metamorphosis begins which ends in turning fairly happy barbarians into very miserable half-civilized people surrounded by a fringe of exploiters and middle-men varied in nation but of one religion—'Take care of Number One' " <sup>1</sup>

Bax had written for the first number of *Commonweal* one of his very best (and briefest) articles—on "Imperialism v Socialism", underlining the words of the League's own Manifesto "The markets of the world are being competed for with an eagerness never before known " Pointing to the numerous colonial wars in Asia, North and Central Africa, and Polynesia, he declared.

"Such wars must necessarily increase in proportion to the concentration of capital in private hands, i e *in proportion as the commercial activity of the world is intensified, and the need for markets becomes more pressing* Markets, markets, markets! Who shall deny that this is the drone-bass ever welling up from beneath the shrill bawling of 'pioneers of civilization', 'avengers of national honour', 'purveyors of gospel light', 'restorers of order' . "

Morris, in his lecture on "Commercial War" delivered a few months later, went even further, and pointed to a change in the character and intensity of the imperialist rivalry of his time. The wars against backward peoples, he said,

"are by no means a new manifestation of this decade but there is something in the way in which it is set about, which to my mind shows that the great commercial system is shaking You cannot fail to have noted the frequency and persistency and bare-faced cynicism of these wars of exploitation of barbarous countries amongst all European nations these last few years, and next as far as we are concerned we are

<sup>1</sup> Brit Mus. Add MSS 45333

not contented with safe little wars against savage tribes with whom no one but ourselves wanted to meddle, but will even risk wars which may or indeed must in the long run embroil us with nations who have huge armies who no more lack the 'resources of civilization' than ourselves"<sup>1</sup>

In February, 1885, the skirmishes and intrigues in Egypt and the Soudan culminated in the fall of Khartoum and the death of General Gordon, and the Press turned on their floods of emotion, lamentations over the death of the "Christian Hero" and cries for vengeance, "ready-made from the great vats in Fleet Street and Printinghouse Square"<sup>2</sup> The Provisional Council threw itself athwart the current of Jingoism, distributing in London a thousand copies of a magnificent Manifesto, which was both direct and defiant

"Citizens, if you have any sense of justice, any manliness left in you, join us in our protest against the wicked and infamous act of brigandage now being perpetrated for the interest solely of the 'privileged' classes of this country, an act of brigandage led up to through the foulest stream of well-planned hypocrisy and fraud that has ever disgraced the foreign policy even of this commercial age"

It is typical of the early propaganda that the Leaguers sought less to make common cause with other opponents of the war, than to expose their half-heartedness and to draw the lesson of the character of imperialism from the events On February 24th a meeting was convened by the Peace Society in the Memorial Hall, with Thomas Burt in the chair "The promoters of the meeting were half-hearted in their speeches", Mahon reported in *Commonweal*, "and seemed afraid to say anything that would hurt the Government, while the market-hunters, who instigated the war, were allowed to go unscathed." In consequence a Socialist League rider was proposed to the general peace resolution, declaring

"That this meeting, consisting mainly of working men, is convinced that the war in the Soudan was prompted by the capitalist class, with a view to the extension of their fields of exploitation And we admit that the victory gained by the Soudanese was a triumph of right over wrong won by a people struggling for their freedom"

The rider was carried with enthusiasm<sup>3</sup> The same rider was

<sup>1</sup> Brit Mus Add MSS 45333

<sup>2</sup> *Manifesto of the Socialist League on the Soudan War*, four-page leaflet, 1885

<sup>3</sup> *Commonweal*, April, 1885 Notes by J L Mahon, League Secretary.

proposed and carried at further meetings, although with more difficulty. On April 2nd a really large peace meeting was held in St James's Hall, with Bradlaugh in the Chair, and Professors Beesly and Thorold Rogers among the speakers. Once again the speakers, with the exception of Thorold Rogers, were lukewarm, and avoided any discussion of the underlying causes of the war. Once again the League put forward a rider, to which Morris and Mowbray were delegated to speak.

"And that this meeting believes that the invasion of the Soudan has been prompted solely by the desire to exploit the country in the interests of capitalists and stock-jobbers, and warns the working classes that such wars will always take place until they (the workers) unite throughout the civilized world, and take their own affairs into their own hands."

Bradlaugh announced that he would allow the mover and seconder of the rider five minutes each, and (according to the *Daily News*) William Morris then rose and said:

"He was convinced that no war had ever been undertaken by the English people that had been more unpopular with the English people than the war in the Soudan [Cheers] That was rather a strange thing. The whole English people made the war, and the whole English people condemned it. Why was that? Because they were forced into the war. And who forced them into it? The masters of the English people. And who were their masters? Those capitalists and stock-jobbers of whom he had just spoken, and who could not exist as a class without this exploitation of foreign nations to get new markets."

At this point Morris was called to time by the Chairman, and a lively altercation took place. Morris protested that he had only been allowed two minutes, and Bradlaugh refused to let him continue unless he spoke in the seconder's time. Morris was finally forced to withdraw, and after Mowbray had seconded, Annie Besant had opposed and John Burns had tried to fight his way to the platform, the rider was rejected.<sup>1</sup> Three weeks later the League held their own "well-attended" meeting at the South Place Institute with Morris in the chair. Edward and Eleanor Aveling, Joseph Lane, E. T. Craig, Frank Kitz, Mowbray and Scheu, together with John Burns and H. H. Champion of the S. D. F. were among the speakers. "Comrade Shaw", billed to speak,

<sup>1</sup> *Daily News*, April 3rd, 1885. *Commonweal*, May, 1885, Monthly Report (signed W. M.)

was not present, finding some objection to the resolutions, and also because "I am G Bernard Shaw, of the Fabian Society, member of an individualist state, and therefore nobody's comrade"<sup>1</sup> Apart from this one black spot, the meeting was a fair success

A similar pattern was followed by the League in the agitation for Irish Home Rule which swept England from 1885 to 1887 Once again, the Socialist League took its place side by side with the Radical agitation against the Coercion Bill of the Liberal Government, but took pains to make it clear that they were marching to a different step "To the Irish", wrote Morris in *Commonweal*, "as to all other nations, whatever their name and race, we Socialists say, Your revolutionary struggles will be abortive or lead to mere disappointment unless you accept as your watchword, WAGE-WORKERS OF ALL COUNTRIES UNITE!"<sup>2</sup> "The Socialist League", Morris noted, "has taken part in all the demonstrations organized by the Irish party, pointing out at the same time that the only real hope of the Irish workmen was that of all workmen throughout the world Socialism"<sup>3</sup> But, to the ordinary Radical, the League's emphasis must have seemed to have been only upon the second point In January, 1886, a leaflet was produced, "Home Rule and Humbug", supporting the demand for Irish independence, but turning the whole issue to the Socialist demand, "You must be free from RENT!" In April a further leaflet was distributed, addressed especially to the Irish, on the theme that independence *alone* would bring no freedom to the Irish people Morris went to lecture in Dublin, and wrote in *Commonweal* "It is a matter of course that until the Irish get Home Rule they will listen to nothing else"

"I fear it seems likely that they will have to go through the dismal road of peasant proprietorship before they get to anything like Socialism, and that road in a country so isolated and so peculiar as Ireland, may be a long one"<sup>4</sup>

In July, 1886, in his regular *Commonweal* "Notes" Morris was analysing (with his usual close eye for detail) the results of the

<sup>1</sup> G B Shaw to Secretary, S L, April 13th, 1885, S L Correspondence, Int Inst Soc Hist

<sup>2</sup> *Commonweal*, October, 1885

<sup>3</sup> "Notes on Propaganda", Brit Mus Add MSS 46345

<sup>4</sup> *Commonweal*, May 8th, 1886, "Socialism in Dublin and Yorkshire"

Home Rule Election in which Gladstone had suffered defeat ("To investigate the chances of the elections in detail is rather the business of an election-agent than a human being . . ") After his customary attack on the "shuffling and intriguing self-seekers" who made up the parliamentary candidates, and on the voters who "consider that when they have voted for the candidate provided for them they have fulfilled all the duties of citizenship", he prophesied that the victors would make a fresh attempt to divide the Irish into "moderates and irreconcilables"

" The Irish will be divided indeed, like the familiar demon in the old fable, cut by his unhappy employer into two unmanageable devils, and the more unmanageable will not be asking for a mere Dublin parliament, but will be claiming his right to do something with the country of Ireland itself, which will make it a fit dwelling-place for reasonable and happy people "

The new Measures of Coercion of the Conservative Government were stoutly opposed by the League <sup>1</sup> But their position had an element of detachment in it While the Leaguers stood like a rock against the clamour of the Jungoes and coercionists, and defended the right of the Irish people to independence, they implied, in the same breath, that the issue of independence was of little importance, and was irrelevant to the fundamental issues of the class struggle However, on this issue the League departed furthest from its "purism" and showed greater maturity than the S.D.F. In January, 1887, the League's Council took the step of making an official approach to the S.D.F. and to Radical Clubs with a view to organizing a joint demonstration for Irish independence and the abolition of landlordism <sup>2</sup> The proposal was declined by the S.D.F. on the grounds that,

<sup>1</sup> See the characteristic resolution of the League's Council, December 20th, 1886 "That the Executive Council of the Socialist League, though believing that the Irish people can never be free until they hold and possess in common the land and the means of production, indignantly protest against the brutal action of the English Government in trying to suppress a movement initiated for the purpose of securing to the Irish soil-tiller a larger share of the product of his labour They further consider that every step taken by the Irish people—legal or illegal—to free themselves from so infamous a yoke as that imposed by England and the landlord class would be perfectly justified" (*Commonweal*, December 25th, 1886)

<sup>2</sup> Joint circular of League and Fabian Society, January 7th, 1887, S.L. Correspondence, Int. Inst. Soc. Hist.

"the best help that we can give to the Irish in their struggles is to occupy as much as possible the Government with an agitation on behalf of the workers of Great Britain"<sup>1</sup>

In April, 1887, Morris persuaded the League to participate in the vast Easter Monday demonstration in Hyde Park against the Tory Coercion Bill.<sup>2</sup> The League and the S D F (which had been brought in, despite Hyndman, by the magnitude of the agitation) each manned one of the seventeen platforms. Shaw and Annie Besant spoke with Morris on the League platform. The two Socialist platforms drew some of the biggest crowds, over 1,000 *Commonweals* were sold, the League's resolution ("That the Irish people should be left free to settle with the landlords without any restriction whatever from the English Parliament") was passed with acclamation, and its banner was cheered repeatedly by the crowd as it passed in the procession (one Irish band even greeting it with the "Marseillaise"). Such incidents suggest that if the League had succeeded in securing formal Radical-Irish-Socialist unity upon this issue, its influence would have rapidly gained ground.

Imperialism—this was understood from the very first by Morris and the Leaguers to be the deadliest enemy to internationalism and to the cause of the people at home. Whatever errors of "purism" the League fell into, these never prevented its hearty participation in the struggle for the rights of oppressed peoples. The facts of imperialist oppression were ever-present in Morris's mind, and it was from the instruments of this oppression that he once drew one of his most striking images of the reality of the class-struggle underlying the apparent "peace" of capitalist society. "Do not be deceived by the outside appearance of order in our plutocratic society," he warned

"It fares with it as it does with the older forms of war, that there is an outside look of quite wonderful order about it, how neat and comforting the steady march of the regiment, how quiet and respectable the sergeants look, how clean the polished cannon, neat as a new pin are the storehouses of murder, the books of the adjutant and sergeant as innocent-looking as may be, nay, the very orders for destruction and

<sup>1</sup> H W Lee, Secretary S D F, to Secretary S L, January 11th, 1887, S L Correspondence, Int Inst Soc Hist

<sup>2</sup> William Morris to S L Council, April 2nd, 1887, S L Correspondence, Int Inst Soc Hist

plunder are given with a quiet precision which seems the very token of a good conscience, this is the mask that lies before the ruined cornfield and the burning cottage, the mangled bodies, the untimely death of worthy men, the desolated home"<sup>1</sup>

Such actions and such writing, rather than the chauvinism of Labour leaders in recent years, belong to the true traditions of British Socialism

### V *The Rank and File—and Commonweal*

The fight against Imperialism was taken up with enthusiasm by the Leaguers. But they felt their most serious work to lie elsewhere—in maintaining the propaganda, by means of open-air and public meetings, the sale of *Commonweal*, the distribution of leaflets and sale of pamphlets. William Morris and J. L. Macdonald wrote hundreds of letters, from the office of the League, to inquirers and possible contacts of the movement.<sup>2</sup> The message of Socialism was spread from Farringdon Road even as far as Lerwick in the Shetlands, where there was a *Commonweal* subscriber while from outlying villages occasional letters of encouragement were received. "I shall go heartily in to support its principles", wrote an agricultural worker from a village in North Berwick,

"and hope we shall be at a level with the aristocracy before the close of this century. This is an agricultural district, & I think if the people had time to consider what Socialists went in for there could be a strong branch formed in this district. But the people are working

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, Vol XXIII, p 186, "Art under Plutocracy" (November, 1883)

<sup>2</sup> In the Nettlau Collection, *Int Inst Soc Hist*, there are scores of torn notes written by Morris, dealing with *Commonweal*, literature, committee meetings, and every kind of organizational detail. In a recent study (H. M. Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party, 1880-1900*, pp 33-4), the impression is given that the League was totally inefficient. While this is generally true of the years 1888-90, it is too sweeping as a judgement on the years 1885-7, and does not take into account the difficulties surmounted in bringing out an eight-page paper week in, week out, for over five years. As far as Morris himself is concerned his failures as an organizer resulted more from his tendency to take too much upon himself, than from inattention to detail. Dr Pelling's statement that "the *Commonweal* accounts were very badly kept" cannot be substantiated by one or two quotations alone and doubt is cast upon it by a series of weekly accounts preserved with the Hammersmith Minutes. In general, while there was both extravagance and inefficiency in the League, Dr Pelling appears to have fallen into the error of exaggerating its "arty", unbusinesslike tone.

from 5 in the morning till 7 at night & have not much time to consider much

"<sup>1</sup>

The message was sometimes spread by unusual means. A "traveling musician", Joseph Williamson, distributed thirty leaflets a day on his tramps through the Midlands. Charlie Faulkner claimed to have converted the Norwegian Captain and Second Mate of his ship on a trip to Sweden in August, 1885. More important, he won over a Radical Club in Oxford to the League. "It makes me feel fresh again", he wrote, "to be aiming at something in which I can feel an interest after the miserable, dreary twaddle of university life."<sup>2</sup> "The people are longing for something better than Conservatism and Liberalism, neither parties can give the reforms necessary for the welfare of the working classes", came a characteristic letter from Desborough, Northants, addressed to Morris. "Do come and explain to us the principles of Socialism and the rights of the workers to the fruits of their labours."<sup>3</sup>

Letters of encouragement were received from many quarters—although only a handful led on to the formation of firm branches (see p. 489). "After carefully reading the League's Manifesto, I discover that I have been a Socialist—actively engaged in propagating Socialistic principles—for upwards of twenty years and am still in earnest", wrote John Oldman from Oldham.<sup>4</sup> A letter came in from the Secretary of the Manchester section of the International Working Men's Association (long defunct in London), declaring "If Engels approves of your action, rest assured that you will have our aid."<sup>5</sup> Among the letters were several expressing "unbounded admiration & esteem" for William Morris. Fred Pickles, the author of one, and a pioneer of the Bradford Branch of the League, wrote in terms which well express the sympathies and outlook of many of those who were to become prominent in the League.

"I am what Mr. Morris would term a 'slave of the Desk' for a firm of Machine Makers (bitterly opposed even to Trade Unions). & I am certain that if they had any idea I sympathized with Socialism I should very soon be unemployed.

<sup>1</sup> S L Correspondence, Int. Inst. Soc. Hist.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, C. J. Faulkner to Secretary, S L, February 1st, 1885.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Elizabeth Allen to William Morris (n.d.).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, John Oldman to Secretary, S L, February 7th, 1885.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Darbyshire to Secretary, S L, February 24th, 1885.



"I am a lover of Art, Poetry, & Nature, but the major portion of my days have to be spent on a stool, writing 'To Goods', 'By Cash', without end Outside the Office window I can see nothing but smokey chimneys & ugliness almost unbearable & six yards from my seat is a horribly smelling stream *literally blacker* than the ink I am now writing with"<sup>1</sup>

From Leicester there came an order for *Commonweal* signed, "Thomas Barclay, Wage Slave". "I will do my best to push it among my class. But it is hard They are ignorant, selfish, apathetic . . ."<sup>2</sup> So the letters poured in—from exceptional manual and agricultural workers, from "slaves of the Desk", from old Owenites and young intellectuals—only the active trade unionists and co-operators were conspicuous by their absence

The *Commonweal* was the main medium of communication with this variegated membership. It was, indeed, a remarkable paper Appearing as a monthly (with supplements) from February, 1885, to May 1st, 1886, it then commenced as a weekly and shortly after this Bax replaced Aveling as sub-editor. Almost every issue included at least one major contribution from Morris During 1885 *The Pilgrims of Hope* appeared in monthly instalments during 1886 and 1887 his series of articles with Bax, "Socialism from the Root Up", appeared side by side with *The Dream of John Ball*. From Morris's pen also came articles on art, labour and occasional careful analyses of the political situation and the aims of the Socialists, while in the greater number of issues he contributed the "Signs of the Times", "Notes", or Editorial, which commented in detail upon the political and social scene Even without Morris's contributions, the paper would rank among the best of Socialist journals at least until 1888 or 1889 Articles by Bax, by the Avelings, by leaders of the international movement, by Scheu, Sketchley and a score of others were of a high quality

On the other hand, as a Socialist paper it had serious weaknesses It never seemed to reconcile the twin tasks of a theoretical journal and a popular propaganda weekly. In fact, Morris seems to have hoped to make it serve both functions As early as July, 1885, the paper came under criticism as being too difficult and theoretical for general sale Tom Maguire, of Leeds, declared that "the workers were for the most part superficial, and that

<sup>1</sup> S L Correspondence, Fred Pickles to Secretary, S L, February 16th, 1885

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, Thomas Barclay to Secretary, S L, June 25th, 1885.

if we wished to create among them a desire and a demand for the *Commonweal* we must look to it that our articles are simpler in construction and more interesting in style than they have been heretofore" <sup>1</sup> Morris seems to have been worried by the criticism, since he declared at the end of the Annual Conference that "he was very anxious that the literary character of the paper should be maintained. He, for one, could not offer to the workers what he did not himself think good. The journal must be Socialistic" <sup>2</sup> And, indeed, throughout 1885 the paper was doing a job that was of the first importance in building the Socialist movement. Important political events received close comment: there were good articles by Binning on trade union problems, and Tom Maguire followed up his criticisms in the most positive way by contributing the first really good article on the conditions of a section of the workers, "The Yorkshire Miners and their Masters" <sup>3</sup> All Socialist activities were well advertised. It was the change to the weekly paper which made the dual functions no longer easily compatible. To fill eight solid pages of print a week, more and more long articles were commissioned or accepted: moreover, a great number of these were on interesting side-issues—material far more useful for a monthly journal than for propagandist sales <sup>4</sup> The number of the *Commonweal* of which more than 1,000 extra copies were sold at the Hyde Park Anti-Coercion Demonstration in April, 1887, was hardly likely to win permanent readers among the politically active working-class Radicals, since only the Editorial by Morris was specially concerned with Irish problems, while the other main articles were more theoretical than usual. <sup>5</sup> It is fair to say that, as a general

<sup>1</sup> *Commonweal*, September, 1885, Replies to Correspondents

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, August Supplement, 1885

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, November, 1885

<sup>4</sup> E.g. among articles published in 1886 were "Ruskin as a Revolutionary Preacher" (Thomas Shore), "Civil Law under Socialism—Contract and Libel" (E. B. Bax), "Capitalistic Advantages of Vegetarianism" (H. Davis), "Tithe and Tithe Rent-charge" (one of Sketchley's detailed articles), "Copyright and 'Piracy'" (H. H. Sparling), etc.

<sup>5</sup> Main contents of the number (April 9th, 1887) were: Editorial by Morris, "Law and Order in Ireland", "Legality" (Bax at his most Bavinating), "The Immorality of Interest", by J. H. Smith, Jubilee poem by Fred Henderson, leading article, "Does Education Diminish Industry?", by H. Halliday Sparling, "A Day in the Country", by Reginald A. Beckett, "Northumbrian Notes", by J. L. Mahon, notes on the Labour Struggle, information of the movement, etc.

rule, the "literary standard" of the *Commonweal* was maintained at the expense of a clear agitational policy.<sup>1</sup> On the industrial side, also, the paper was weak, although from the last months of 1886 onwards a regular feature was made of "The Labour Struggle"—a page of undigested but very useful news items on strikes and industrial disputes in Britain and abroad.<sup>2</sup>

This weakness was not so much in understanding, on the part of Morris or his comrades, but was a true reflection of the composition of the League, of the weakness of the movement, and of the general lack of industrial experience among the members of the Council. It was found equally in its general agitational literature. For example, the first pamphlet issued was (rightly) an *Address to Trades Unions*, written by Belfort Bax. But the good intention shown in the choice of subject and audience, was marred by the density of the style and the fact that five and a half of the eight pages were given over to the historical development of capitalism and trades unionism (a page of this being on the craft guilds), a further page and a half to generalizations about Socialism, and only *one paragraph* on the role of trade unions in the contemporary struggle. This was the *only* serious pamphlet for sale to trades unionists until Binning wrote a far more direct and simple one in August, 1886.<sup>3</sup> Only the Avelings' pamphlet, *The Factory Hell*, contained any close analysis of the workers' conditions. The majority of the early leaflets (whatever their "subject") were concerned with the explanation of the simplest essentials of Socialism.

"The rich, under the names of Landowners, Financiers, Manufacturers, Speculators, Shareholders, and the like are allowed to become proprietors of the raw material and tools of labour of the country, and force the workers to labour two hours for them and one for themselves out of every three they labour."

<sup>1</sup> Morris once lamented that almost the only unsolicited contributions to the paper were manuscript poems.

<sup>2</sup> That Morris was aware of this weakness is shown by his attempts to correct it: e.g. Morris to Glasier, February 3rd, 1887: "Would be glad of something from you of local working men or socialistic interest, I mean such as the condition of such and such people or towns in your neighbourhood" (Glasier MSS).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Binning, *Organised Labour—the Duty of the Trades' Unions in Relation to Socialism* (*The Socialist Platform*, No. 5, 1886).

Perhaps the hardest hitting were those which championed the right of propaganda itself<sup>1</sup>

Whatever weaknesses there were in this early Socialist propaganda, it was slowly but certainly taking effect. The presence of a Socialist movement was being advertised—it was being noticed in the Press—the ideas of the "share-and-share-alike crowd" were being discussed in the workshops and the Radical clubs. Tom Mann in his engineering shop in 1885 felt that "something was buzzing". The workers knew that something quite different from the ordinary Radical political propaganda was afoot, and that this "something" was in the nature of a challenge to all the established parties. For the movement to get out of its infant stage, it was necessary for the Socialists to make contact, not with a few exceptional workers (the authors of the packages of poetry which poured into the *Commonweal* office), but with the working class as a whole. This is the reason why it was so important that the Socialists took to the streets and the parks, where they could show themselves openly to the people and explain their message. This is also the reason why the authorities felt it was important to drive them back into the private rooms and lecture halls from which they had come. And this is the reason why the Socialists, if they were to become a force, had no alternative but to defy the police and stay in the streets in the face of intimidation. The resulting struggles, which continued in London and the provinces until the end of the decade, were the most important form of advertisement for Socialism at this stage of the propaganda.

## VI *The Fight for Free Speech*

The Socialist pioneers took to the street corners with enthusiasm. In 1885 and 1886 Morris led the League into a friendly rivalry with the S D F as to which could keep open the greatest number of open-air pitches in London. Even in the depth of winter, a few of the stands were kept going. The audience did not, of course, gather of its own accord. Regularity, persistency, good speakers, the attention of the police, hecklers in the crowd—all or some of these conditions were necessary before a really good

<sup>1</sup> See esp. *The Worker's Claims and 'Public Opinion'*, League Leaflet No. 5, written by Scheu and revised by Morris.

open-air pitch could be established. Often branches were discouraged by disappointing results on a first or second attempt, and had to wind up their courage anew before beginning again. Sometimes it took months before a really suitable site could be found. The comrades leading the branches, as well as the speakers, had continually to screw up their courage. For all these reasons, Morris—although by no means a gifted outdoor speaker<sup>1</sup>—felt that it was his duty to take a lead in the work by personal example and to the end of his life it was the outdoor stand which seemed to him the *real* platform of the propaganda.

“Often when I was staying on a Saturday night at Kelmscott House”, relates Andreas Scheu,

“we would stroll early on the Sunday morning on the streets. I would speak to a few youths who came our way. ‘Friends! We have come to talk to you and to enlighten you . . .’ They would always stand and listen, gazing with astonishment at the two strange men, and soon a dozen or more would be standing there. ‘Now,’ I would say to Morris, ‘now you have an audience that is not critical of you. Speak to your heart’s content.’ And he did. He spoke of his hatred of the commercial system, and of its ‘orderliness’ and of its ugliness. He showed how the struggle for daily bread suppressed the feeling for beauty which existed in human beings.”<sup>2</sup>

Or he would go with a few members of the League, James Tochattu or Bernard Shaw (one of the most brilliant of the open-air propagandists, and the best at handling the hecklers) to the stands of the Hammersmith Branch, at Walham Green or Hammersmith Bridge, where audiences of up to 500 were sometimes won. His long-established Sunday breakfasts with the Burne-Joneses were now cut short, and Morris would set off for his duty with a “simplicity which . . . was fine to see.” “I am not over inclined for my morning preaching at Walham Green”, he wrote once to “Georgie” Burne-Jones,

<sup>1</sup> Most accounts agree that Morris was an indifferent outdoor speaker. “Any-one can be a public speaker if he only pegs away sufficiently at it”, Morris said himself (Compton-Rickett, *op cit*, p. 233). Bernstein voices the general opinion on his speaking, indoor and outdoor, when he says “He could express his ideas in a very arresting manner, but this when speaking to a comparatively small circle in an unconstrained gossiping tone. Rhetoric was . . . not natural to him, his whole nature was . . . anti-rhetorical” (*My Years of Exile*, p. 206).

<sup>2</sup> Scheu, *op cit*, Part III, Ch. VI.

"but go I must, as also to Victoria Park in the afternoon I had a sort of dastardly hope that it might rain Mind you, I don't pretend to say I don't like it in some way or other, like it when I am on my legs, if I flow"<sup>1</sup>

Like it or not, he drove himself on with it in his provincial lecturing tours he was not only ready to fit in open-air meetings, but insisted that the comrades should arrange to hold them. "Next time I come it had better be later in the year when the weather is more possible", he wrote to Glasier in Glasgow in 1888. "I had a good deal of time on my hands which I might have used for open-air work"<sup>2</sup>

The first serious attack by the police was upon the International Club, in Stephen's Mews, on May 9th, 1885.<sup>3</sup> Windows were smashed, property destroyed and stolen, and members arrested in an outrage which resembled more an assault by hooligans than a forced entry by the representatives of the "law". A Defence Committee was hurriedly formed, with Morris as Treasurer, and with a number of delegates from the London Radical Clubs Very soon the weary round of prosecutions for "obstruction" began in earnest At Stratford, an old stamping-ground of the L E L, Kitz was arrested for obstruction in August, but the case was dismissed The centre of interest shifted to Dod Street in Limehouse, where the S D F were using a long-established open-air site of Radical and religious bodies Several cases of "obstruction" were brought against S D F speakers, and Jack Williams, refusing to pay his fine, was sentenced to a month's hard labour The League formally offered its help to the S.D F—an offer which was warmly accepted. Support among the London Radical Clubs was aroused, and the Defence Committee was transformed into a Vigilance Committee with the powerful backing of the East London United Radical Club, as well as of the Fabian Society (whose delegate was Annie Besant) and various smaller societies<sup>4</sup> On Sunday, September 20th, 1885, a great crowd was drawn to Dod Street, and addressed by Hyndman and John Mathias (a prominent Radical) from one end of the street,

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, p. 194

<sup>2</sup> Glasier MSS, April 16th, 1888 See note <sup>2</sup>, p. 540

<sup>3</sup> See *Commonweal*, June, 1885.

<sup>4</sup> Circular among S L Correspondence, Int Inst Soc. Hist.

and by Mahon and Kitz from the other. A resolution was moved protesting against the recent prosecutions. It was only after the meetings had been declared closed, and the crowd was dispersing, that the police suddenly struck, arresting two banner-bearers with some brutality, and seizing others in the crowd.

The scene next day in the Thames Police Court, presided over by a magistrate named Saunders, later became notorious in the Socialist movement. Eight members of the crowd were accused of resisting the police or of obstruction, including Mowbray, Kitz, Mahon and Lewis Lyons, a tailoring worker. Their attitude was defiant. Mahon declared

"He went along with others with the distinct intention of holding a meeting there, and, of course, going to prison if he were arrested and charged, and thousands went and would go again with the same intention."<sup>1</sup>

The attitude of Saunders, the magistrate, was scandalous throughout, and was more in keeping with that of an ill-tempered prosecuting attorney. When Aveling gave evidence on behalf of the accused, Saunders told him that he had broken the law by attending and speaking at the meeting himself, since any such meeting was an "obstruction."

"DR AVELING [said] he spoke himself, as he should do again next Sunday.

"MR SAUNDERS I advise you not to, or else you will find yourself locked up.

"DR AVELING I shall speak there each Sunday till I am locked up."

Eleanor followed suit. The police singled out Lyons for their special favours, at least one of them (as was incontestably shown upon his later appeal) perjuring himself right, left and centre. Saunders capped the whole with a grotesquely biased and vindictive summing-up, followed by a sentence of two months' hard labour upon Lyons, and 40s. or one month upon the remainder. The sentence called forth cries of "Shame" from the spectators, who included Morris, and "a rush of police was made at those in court." According to Aveling's account, the police—among whom the perjured constable was prominent—"commenced an assault upon all and sundry", and in particular upon Eleanor.

<sup>1</sup> *Daily News*, September 22nd, 1885

"William Morris, remonstrating at the hustling and thumping, became at once the chief thumpee. There has rarely been seen anything more brutal than the way in which two or three able-bodied young men fell upon the author of what one of the newspapers called the 'Paradise League'." Morris threatened to summons the police, and promptly found himself under arrest.<sup>1</sup>

The sequel took place two hours later, when the author of *The Earthly Paradise*, "who had been arrested for alleged disorderly conduct was placed at the bar." A constable declared that after the sentence was passed he—

"was endeavouring to restore quiet when the prisoner, who had called out 'Shame', hissed, became very violent, and struck him on the chest and broke the strap of his helmet

"MR MORRIS I give a direct negative to that I certainly did not hit him

"MR SAUNDERS Have you any witnesses?

"MR MORRIS I do not know whether there is any one here who saw it. I quite confess that when I heard the sentences passed on the prisoners my feelings got the better of me, and I did call out 'Shame'.

Then this policeman came and distinctly hustled me. When you are pushed you naturally push again, but that is not resisting the police. I turned round and remonstrated with the policeman, but I distinctly assert that I never raised my hands. He was very rough, and I am quite prepared to bring a charge of assault against him.

"MR SAUNDERS What are you?

"PRISONER I am an artist, and a literary man, pretty well known, I think, throughout Europe.

"MR SAUNDERS I suppose you did not intend to do this?

"PRISONER I never struck him at all.

"MR SAUNDERS Well, I will let you go.

"PRISONER But I have not done anything.

"MR SAUNDERS Well, you can stay if you like.

"PRISONER I don't want to stay.

"He was then liberated, and on getting into the street was loudly cheered by the crowd who had gathered there."<sup>2</sup>

It was indeed an unlucky moment for the police when they singled out Morris for arrest. The scene, of course, was a three days' wonder. Attention would certainly have been drawn to Saunders' conduct even without this incident, but now the whole thing was thrown into highlight. No amount of editorials taxing Morris with his "indiscretion" or worse could hide the fact that

<sup>1</sup> *Commonweal*, October, 1885

<sup>2</sup> *Daily News*, September 22nd, 1885



the police persecution was both unjust and unequal *Funny Folks* carried a cartoon of the police blacking Morris's boots.<sup>1</sup> The doves of literature were thrown into a flutter. "Do you see the report of the row the Socialists have had with the police in the East End?" George Gissing wrote to his brother

"Think of William Morris being hauled into the box for assaulting a policeman! And the magistrate said to him 'What are you?' Great Heavens! Alas, what the devil is such a man doing in that galley? It is painful to me beyond expression. Why cannot he write poetry in the shade? He will inevitably coarsen himself in the company of ruffians

"Keep apart, keep apart, and preserve one's soul alive—that is the teaching for the day. It is ill to have been born in these times, but one can make a world within the world."<sup>2</sup>

"The man who wrote 'Daphne'! Oh, it is monstrous!"

The police attack at Dod Street, and the incident of Morris in the Thames Police Court, together did a power of good. The first enraged the feelings of Radicals and Socialists alike. "I am prepared to come armed [next week], and should I be arrested and abused to defend myself as best I can", wrote Robert Banner from Woolwich.<sup>3</sup> The second tickled the people's sense of humour, and helped to bring more Radicals behind the Vigilance Committee. Between 30,000 and 50,000 turned up the next Sunday at Dod Street, and Aveling fulfilled his pledge,<sup>4</sup> addressing the crowd together with Hyndman, Shaw, John Burns and leading Radicals. The police, for fear of alienating the whole Radical movement, kept at a discreet distance. On the following Sunday Morris was among those who addressed a large crowd

<sup>1</sup> *Funny Folks*, October 10th, 1885

<sup>2</sup> To Algernon Gissing, September 22nd, 1885 (*Letters of George Gissing to his Family*)

<sup>3</sup> R. Banner to Secretary, S L, September 21st, 1885, S L Correspondence, Int Inst Soc Hist

<sup>4</sup> Hyndman and the S D F made a mountainous row with the League out of this incident. They alleged that an agreement had been made that no Socialist should speak until the Radical speakers had taken their turn, and that Aveling had been guilty of a "breach of faith" (*Justice*, October 3rd). Aveling, having publicly stated in court that he *would* speak, might have been forgiven even if he had entered into such an agreement. But the *entire* Vigilance Committee, including all the Radical representatives, but excluding the representatives of the S D F, declared that the S D F statement was false. Morris summarized all the factual evidence in *Commonweal*, November, 1885

welcoming Jack Williams of the S D F. on his release from prison Repercussions of the Thames Police Court incident were felt even as far afield as America, one correspondent writing:

"The news of Morris's arrest has reached us, and we take that to be the best thing that has happened for a long time That very day an attempt to suppress free speech was made here, and a League for its defence promptly formed"<sup>1</sup>

Morris's comments on this "best thing" are not recorded. Certainly he saw its humorous side

"There was a funny scene in the police station where they charged me, the inspector and the constable gravely discussing whether the damage done to the helmet was 2d or 1½d"<sup>2</sup>

In public he made no comment, but set about the defence of Lyons, making use of attacks upon himself in the Press as an excuse for sending letters on Lyons's case In private he loathed the notoriety of the whole business On another occasion, says Shaw,

"when he had been desperately uncomfortable at a police court, going bail for some of the comrades, I found him rubbing it all off by reading *The Three Musketeers* for the hundredth time or so On one such occasion his co-bailsmen was Bradlaugh, and he envied the assurance with which that platform athlete ordered everyone about and dominated the police staff as if he had been the Home Secretary He was nothing of a bully in spite of his pathological temper, and when physical courage came under discussion said 'I am a funkster, but I have one good blow in me'"<sup>3</sup>

If the Socialists had hoped that the Dod Street affair would settle the matter, they were disappointed "This summer", Morris noted for 1886,

"we were much annoyed by the police who persisted in interfering with our open-air meetings in the course of the legal proceedings it was made clear that the law could so be wrested as to make impossible any meeting on public ground not specially set apart . Our open-air meetings nevertheless went on briskly the stations being very numerous"<sup>4</sup>

The persecution was active in the provinces as well, and was

<sup>1</sup> *Commonweal*, November, 1885, Eleanor Marx-Aveling's International Record

<sup>2</sup> *Letters*, p 239

<sup>3</sup> G B Shaw in the *Observer*, November 6th, 1949

<sup>4</sup> "Notes on Propaganda", Brit Mus Add MSS 46345

certainly part of a national campaign of intimidation.<sup>1</sup> Morris was throughout prominent in the struggle, as bailman, witness, speaker, and propagandist in the *Commonweal*. The unemployed 'riots' of February, 1886 (see p. 477 f), preluded a fresh bout of prosecutions. Arrests were almost a weekly occurrence, and bail was in constant demand. Sam Mainwaring recalled a prosecution of Kitz in the early days

"I went to the office of the S. L. in Faringdon Road, and informed the members—who were having a social evening at the hall—of the arrest, and that we wanted bail. Carruthers and Morris left at once with me, and when we arrived at West Ham Police Station I introduced them to the inspector on duty as the sureties for Kitz's appearance on the following Monday.

"The officer put the question 'What is your name?' Our comrade answered, 'William Morris'.

"'What are you?' queried the officer. But before Morris could reply to this question, Carruthers stepped up to the desk, and in a vehement manner said 'Don't you know? Why, this is the author of *The Earthly Paradise*'.

"Morris turned to his friend with an astonished look and said 'Good heavens, Carruthers! You don't expect a policeman to know anything about *The Earthly Paradise*, do you?' And, turning to the inspector, said 'I am a shopkeeper, carrying on business in Oxford Street'."<sup>2</sup>

Morris knew that his presence embarrassed the police, and made them a little hesitant in their attentions. Consequently, he made a point of taking the platform in the danger-spots himself. Probably the most serious contest in London in 1886 was at Bell Street, Edgware Road, where for nearly two years the Marylebone comrades had been keeping open a pitch. The police seemed determined to make a test case. They chose a site which, unlike Dod Street, was not in the heart of the East End, and where they could get various chemists, publicans and respectable tradesmen to issue complaints. Although the Socialists kept the pavements clear of crowds, plain-clothes men and police agents stood in the footway and refused to move when requested by the

<sup>1</sup> The Glasgow comrades commented on "the inordinate regard for the public convenience in the way of keeping vacant pieces of ground and spacious street corners free for the passage of hypothetical vehicles, which our presence invariably excites in the mind of the local policeman" (*Annual Report of the Glasgow Branch of the Socialist League*, May, 1887).

<sup>2</sup> *Freedom*, January, 1897.

speakers One man, the Socialists alleged in open court, was actually paid by the police to issue complaints Everything indicated that the police were out for a real "kill" and when, after the first court case, Mainwaring of the League and Jack Williams, the fearless champion of free speech of the S D F, addressed a large meeting on July 11th, twenty or thirty mounted police were stationed conspicuously in surrounding streets Both men were summoned and—instead of being fined summarily by the magistrate—they were committed for trial at the Middlesex Sessions Sam Mainwaring later recalled with admiration Morris's part in the ensuing struggle

"When we all thought that a long term of imprisonment would be the result, he volunteered to speak in the interval between the committal and trial, and, when reminded of the general impression that imprisonment would be the result, he simply said, 'Well, it will be another experience, and we must not allow the fear of consequences to interfere with our duty' "<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly, he took the stand at Bell Street the next Sunday, and delivered a characteristic speech

"After adjuring the people to keep quiet and orderly in the event of the police interfering, he said that he had come to Marylebone to maintain the right of the Socialists to speak in the streets in the same way that people holding other opinions were allowed to do The police meddled with our open-air meetings simply because we were Socialists—because we advocated the cause of the people He refused to live contentedly under a condition of society which made a perpetual prison for the majority of the community Our present society was grounded upon monopoly and corruption Police, army, navy, magistrates, lawyers, parliament, etc, were all doing their utmost to sustain that monopoly and corruption All wealth was the result of labour, therefore all wealth belonged to labour those who labour should receive the wealth they create He was impelled to talk to them that morning because the present condition of things was a bad one He had been asked by a lady the other day why he did not talk to the middle-class Well, the middle-class had their books with plenty of leisure to read them, the working classes had no leisure, no books [At this point Chief Inspector Shephard appeared outside the crowd, and said that he could not get in This was false, however, and the inspector was immediately made way for by the people, who groaned him heartily as he approached the

<sup>1</sup> *Freedom* See Morris to Carruthers, March 25th, 1886 "I rather expect to learn one more new craft—oakum-picking to wit, though I assure you I don't want to—far from it" (*Letters*, p 251)

speaker Having come to Morris he told him to desist, which Morris refused to do, on which the inspector took his name and address ] The middle and upper classes were enabled to live in luxury and idleness on the poverty and degradation of the workers There was only one way in which this state of things could be altered—society must be turned downside up A true society meant to every one the right to live, the right to labour, and the right to enjoy the fruits of his labour The useless class must disappear, and the two classes now forming society must dissolve into one whole useful class, and the labour class become society In conclusion, he appealed to them to do all they could for the Cause, to educate themselves, to discuss the social question with their fellows, and prepare themselves for the great social revolution ”<sup>1</sup>

The speech lasted half an hour, and was heartily cheered, and a summons for obstruction was duly issued.<sup>2</sup>

There is no doubt that Morris's intervention embarrassed the magistrate Mainwaring, who—while still under a writ for the previous case—had officiated for a minute or two at Morris's meeting, came before the court on the same day (July 24th) and his case (like that of Williams) was sent up to the Sessions But Morris, the magistrate said, “as a gentleman would at once see, when it was pointed out to him, that such meetings were a nuisance, and . . . would desist from taking part in them”. He thought a fine would meet the case—is<sup>1</sup> In the event, both Williams and Mainwaring were fined £20, plus a surety for good behaviour of £50, and Williams, as in his previous case, refused to pay and was imprisoned for two months The difference in treatment of the “gentleman” and the workers was plain as a pikestaff The results of the trial showed—Morris commented in *Commonweal*

“It is not only the police who have it in their power to prevent any one obnoxious to the Government opening their mouths to speak in the open air, but it seems that any political, religious, or temperance meeting is at the mercy of the first cantankerous person, neighbour or otherwise, or of a political or ecclesiastical enemy In other words, it is a mere phrase without truth to say that freedom of speech exists in this country ”<sup>3</sup>

“The Judge was abominable”, Morris wrote to his daughter “You would have thought that our friends had at least committed

<sup>1</sup> *Commonweal*, July 24th, 1886

<sup>2</sup> The summons is preserved in British Museum

<sup>3</sup> *Commonweal*, August 21st, 1886

a murder under aggravated circumstances—so bitter an advocate he was against them”<sup>1</sup> The Radicals, alarmed by the February riots, were far slower to come to the defence of the Socialists than at the time of Dod Street, and Morris took them to task “This is their [the ‘reactionists’] revenge for Dod Street”, he warned “their counter-stroke in the war for the free expression of opinion”

“To speak plainly, we Socialists are not such fools that we do not understand the matter Sir Charles Warren was put into Colonel Henderson’s place after the Trafalgar Square riots that he might make a stroke on us by driving our propaganda out of the streets The authorities probably would have no great wish to suppress the religious meetings, or those of the Radicals or Secularists even, but if it must be done in order to get rid of us—well, it must”<sup>2</sup>

In a striking general reflection upon the struggle (as true to-day as then), he pointed to the tendency of the middle classes to take offence at *all* “unseemly” behaviour in the streets, irrespective of opinion

“I have noted of late years a growing impatience on the part of the more luxurious portion of society of the amusements and habits of the workers, when they in any way interfere with the calm of their luxury, or to put it in plainer language a tendency to arrogant petty tyranny in these matters They would, if they could, clear the streets of everything that may injure their delicate susceptibilities They would clear the streets of costermongers, organs, processions, and lecturers of all kinds, and make them a sort of decent prison corridors, with people just trudging to and from their work”<sup>3</sup>

“If there are any who think it possible to quench the expression of great principles that are at work throughout all civilization by petty police persecution, they will find themselves mistaken”, he wrote Privately, his purist leanings made him feel the struggle was a side-issue, and he did not fully realize the importance of the advertisement given to the Cause. “I grudge everything that takes people’s attention off the true economical and social issues, which are the only things of importance”, he wrote to Glasier. “Still, we must fight out this skirmish . . .”<sup>4</sup> The Bell Street trial he felt to be “a sorry exhibition”, “except for our comrade

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, p 257

<sup>2</sup> *Commonweal*, August 21st, 1886

<sup>3</sup> “Free Speech in the Streets”, *Ibid*, July 31st, 1886

<sup>4</sup> Glasier, p 186

Mainwaring's speech "I was proud of his bearing altogether" <sup>1</sup> In fact, the Dod Street, Stratford and Bell Street affairs (and the score of minor incidents) were a good deal more important than he understood. A speech like that of Mainwaring from the dock (or of John Burns before him) did not go unnoticed: it attracted more serious sympathy and attention than the preaching of the unadulterated message *alone* would have done. It showed the metal that Socialists were made of.

"I am defending my own case, and, as you can see, I am no lawyer. If I were told *not* to speak in the streets in the future, I do not see how I could keep silent. I am bound to speak out my thoughts. I began a hard life at an early age to help my family. I have wandered here and there all through the country, across the sea to the United States and back, in search of a scant livelihood, and I feel that I should be wrong indeed if, thinking that there was a possibility in the future of my children avoiding the like hardships, I kept silent." <sup>2</sup>

Moreover, these actions gave a striking proof of the reality of class rule, and showed people, as Morris told the comrades, "the why & the wherefore of their being Socialists" <sup>3</sup> If the Socialists *had* been intimidated, it would indeed have been a "sorry business" but as they were not, the flame of their enthusiasm burnt all the higher.

Temporarily—and as far as London was concerned—the battle for the street corners and the parks was won. It was won, not by abstract legal decisions or the "liberal tradition", but by the force of the people. It was won by the fearlessness of the comrades who came before the courts. It was won, even more, by the persistence of the Socialists. The meetings simply went on, irrespective of the cases. Despite the Bell Street decision, the Marylebone Branch resumed their meetings on a new site at once. Morris himself was busy in August keeping the propaganda going.

"I had a brisk day yesterday though no policeman's hand touched my sacred collar. I went from the Grange to Walham Green where we had a good little meeting attentive and peaceable, back then to the Grange & dinner and then away Eastward Ho to Victoria Park rather sulky at having to turn out so soon after dinner. Though Victoria Park is rather a pretty place (dirty though) and lots of trees. Had a good

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, p. 257

<sup>2</sup> *Commonweal*, August 21st, 1886

<sup>3</sup> *Letters*, p. 258

meeting there also—spoke for nearly an hour altogether in a place made noisy by other meetings near, also a band<sup>1</sup>

The police had certainly not thrown in their hand 1887 was to see a frontal attack on the right of meeting in Trafalgar Square But they were more cautious in their petty local provocations And there is no doubt that William Morris's part in the fight for free speech was an important influence in winning popular sympathy to the Socialist side

### VII *The S D F and the Unemployed Riots*

Throughout 1885 and 1886 relations between the S D F and the League were in a fluid state Apart from the unity of Dod Street (which was broken by a ridiculous attack on Aveling in *Justice*),<sup>2</sup> relations between the Councils of the two bodies were never good In May, 1885, the S D F were spreading the tale that the Socialist League,

"was composed entirely of middle-class men, who had no real interest in the workers, that they were not Socialists at all, but anarchists and revolutionists, and that they were all at loggerheads with each other, and were only held together by the influence of William Morris"<sup>3</sup>

Scheu, Bax, Lane and others, for their part, were equally bitter in their hostility to Hyndman. Morris used his influence to prevent public attacks on the S D F in *Commonweal* while John Burns and Jack Williams, on their side, were always ready to co-operate with the Leaguers in the fight for free speech, and remained on friendly terms with Morris<sup>4</sup> Much of the propagandist work done by both bodies was of the same kind, and outside London it was often a toss-up whether provincial bodies

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, p. 258

<sup>2</sup> See note 4, p. 470

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Ewing (Manchester Socialist Union) to William Morris, May 9th, 1885, S L Correspondence, Int Inst Soc Hist

<sup>4</sup> See Morris to Joyes, February 3rd, 1885 (just after the split) "That blessed Industrial Remuneration Conference has been at work The Federation sent Burns and Williams there, who seem to have had some fun, they called in at the League yesterday morning and were in very good spirits about it, though Burns has had the sack from his employer for his pains" (For the Industrial Remuneration Conference, see Lee, *op cit* p. 95) When Burns was tried after the February riots, he wrote to Morris "Just a line before we proceed to arrest I am of course doubtful as to what will happen but if we should get a sentence kindly drop a note occasionally to my dear wife to cheer her up" (Brit Mus Add MSS 45345)



affiliated to the S.D.F. or League, or, like the societies at Manchester and Sheffield, remained independent of both. Only in London and Glasgow was there serious friction between the rank and file and in both places those among the workers tinged with "anarchism" or "destructivism", together with the "slaves of the desk" and aspiring poets, tended to be drawn to the League (see p. 462) while those workers with a more practical political outlook tended to join the S.D.F. But this difference did not become marked until 1887 or 1888, and in these years the great majority of the rank and file of both bodies was "quite proletarian".<sup>1</sup> Indeed, there was little reason why the membership of both bodies should not have been drawn into ever closer relations if it had not been for the election scandal of November, 1885.

The S.D.F. had put up two propaganda candidates in this first election under the new Reform Act—Jack Williams and Fielding in Hampstead and Kennington. They polled twenty-seven and thirty-two votes respectively. This was bad enough—but worse followed. It leaked out (and was admitted by the Federation) that the candidatures had been backed by "Tory gold" moreover, Hyndman visited Joseph Chamberlain and threatened him with more Socialist candidatures in opposition to the Liberals if he did not promise to support the Eight Hours Bill in the next session.<sup>2</sup> Every word in the statement of the seceders from the Federation seemed to be justified.

The scandal destroyed at a blow the goodwill established between the Socialists and Radicals in the Dod Street affair. Moreover, it exposed the puny strength behind Hyndman's grandiose phrases. Several of the League's Council were filled with "gratified spite",<sup>3</sup> and sought to profit from the S.D.F.'s discomfiture. Scheu became convinced that Hyndman was "a paid agent of the Tories (or liberal-reactionists) for the purpose of

<sup>1</sup> G. B. Shaw's evidence in Fabian Tract, No. 41.

<sup>2</sup> See Morris to Carruthers, *Letters*, p. 249, and Engels to Bernstein, December 7th, 1885, and to Sorge, January 29th, 1886, *Labour Monthly*, November, 1933. The marked similarities in the two accounts, which even echo each other's turn of phrase when describing the riots and Hyndman's intrigues with Chamberlain, suggest that Morris and Engels had discussed the matters together. This suggestion is reinforced by a reference to Morris ("as Morris says") in one of Engels' letters.

<sup>3</sup> G. B. Shaw to Andreas Scheu, December 17th, 1885, Scheu Correspondence, *Int. Inst. Soc. Hist.*

bringing Socialism into discredit with the masses".<sup>1</sup> Bax drafted a resolution, against which Morris protested in vain,<sup>2</sup> viewing "with indignation the action of certain members" of the S D F. in "trafficking with the honour of the Socialist party", and expressing sympathy with those members who "repudiate the tactics of the disreputable clique concerned in the recent nefarious proceedings"<sup>3</sup> Beyond this, no comment was made in *Commonweal*. Doubtless it was hoped that the best elements in the Federation would now join the League. But many good S D F members, who thought that a mistake of tactics rather than principle had been made, regarded the League's resolution as a cowardly attack at a time when they were being upheld to general ridicule and abuse, and resented it more than any other friction between the two bodies.<sup>4</sup> It is true that there were secessions from the S D F the Bristol Branch withdrew into isolation<sup>5</sup> James Macdonald, C L Fitzgerald and a few others withdrew to form the "Socialist Union", which tried for nearly two years to steer a middle course between the Federation and the League, but which was of little influence<sup>6</sup> but only a handful of seceders joined the Socialist League

The League's own part in the General Election was confined to the distribution of a new leaflet, *For Whom Shall We Vote?* The leaflet was drafted by Morris,<sup>7</sup> and became adopted for standard use in subsequent elections, since—whatever the issue of the

<sup>1</sup> Andreas Scheu to H H Sparling (Secretary, S L), December 13th, 1885, S L Correspondence, Int Inst Soc Hist

<sup>2</sup> G B Shaw to Scheu, December 17th, 1885, Scheu Correspondence, Int Inst Soc Hist

<sup>3</sup> *Commonweal*, January 1st, 1887

<sup>4</sup> See Lee, *op cit*, p 106

<sup>5</sup> For Bristol Socialism, see S Bryher, *An Account of the Labour and Socialist Movement in Bristol* (1929)

<sup>6</sup> The Socialist Union published a leaflet, *Socialism and Political Action*, which tried to distinguish the organization from the League and S D F by laying claim to the field of local government. The Union, it declared, "maintains that the great aim of the wage-earning classes should be to get hold of the administrative machinery of the community. That they should take control of the School Boards, Boards of Guardians, Local Boards, Town Councils, and all the other bodies in local affairs." Finally, "the present centralized system would give place to a confederation of free and locally independent communes"

<sup>7</sup> William Morris to Chairman, Council of S L, November 9th, 1885, Int Inst Soc Hist.

election—the League's policy was the same "DO NOT VOIE AT ALL!" The workers were advised to keep free from the political factions and mock-battles of the capitalist parties, and to devote their energies to the preaching of Socialism

"Learn by any means that offer, read Socialist books, papers, and pamphlets, attend Socialist meetings, discuss the matter Let the good news spread! By ones and twos, by tens, by hundreds, by thousands join the Socialists, the great Brotherhood of Labour

"When those who govern you see the number of votes cast at each election growing less and less, and note at the same time the growth of Socialist bodies terror will fill their souls, and they must either use violence against you, which you will learn how to repel, or quail before you and sit helpless until the time will come when you will step in and claim your place, and become the new-born Society of the world "

Here, it is clear, is one reason why the majority of those who resigned from the S D F in disgust at Hyndman's intrigues did not throw in their lot with the League And here, also, are grounds for Engels's complaint to Liebknecht early in 1886

"Bax and Morris are strongly under the influence of the anarchists These men must pass through this *in corpore vile*—[i.e. They must experience the errors of anarchism *for themselves* before they will learn ] They will get out of it somehow, but it is certainly fortunate that these children's ailment's are passing before the masses come into the movement But so far they are obstinately refusing to come in You will not bring the numerous working class as a whole into the movement by sermons ."1

But—in the meantime—the S D F had taken part in something a good deal more arresting than "sermons" Champion, Burns, Tom Mann and others had for some time been conducting an agitation among the unemployed in the East End A meeting called in Trafalgar Square for February 8th, 1886, by a curious gang of "Tory Fair Traders" was the occasion for a counter-demonstration of the unemployed called by the S D F Both bodies met in the Square, and a part of the crowd was addressed by Burns, Williams, Champion, Hyndman and Sparling of the League—all of them with a touch of revolutionary bluster which both Morris and Engels thought overdone In the sequel, the Socialists led the crowds up Pall Mall for a further meeting in

<sup>1</sup> Engels to Sorge, April 29th, 1886, *Labour Monthly*, November, 1933

Hyde Park There was some jeering from the clubs The unemployed retaliated with stones and window-smashing, and then a good deal of indiscriminate damage and looting took place, in which Morris's own shop was lucky to escape

Well, that was that—a bit of a bust-up, and both the Socialists and the unemployed had learnt a lesson But the importance of the incident lay in the reaction of the middle class, which was thrown into a panic of ludicrous proportions The next two days of dark, foggy weather were full of monstrous rumours. "If MESSRS. BURNS and HYNDMAN are not arrested already, they ought to be arrested this morning", thundered *The Times* Editorial the next day "No misplaced fear of making martyrs of them ought to stand in the way of their punishment" Its news column for the 10th began "In the West End yesterday there was something little short of panic . . ." Its Editorial declared "There has been nothing like a panic . . ." Its news column for the following day "London was yesterday thrown into a state of utter panic . . ." Rumours flew round that the East End was marching through the fog towards the West All the submerged class-fears and hatred of the bourgeoisie suffered nearly a week of naked exposure The tradesmen put up their shutters as far afield as Hammersmith and Kilburn<sup>1</sup> Queen Victoria wrote furious letters to her Home Secretary 1848 was mentioned in solemn tones "Sir", one gentleman who had had the misfortune of getting his eye-glasses and carriage windows smashed in the rioting, wrote to *The Times*

"I am a subscriber to various charities and hospitals, which I shall discontinue I have always advocated the cause of the people I shall do so no more"<sup>2</sup>

But those whose eye-glasses and windows were still intact took a different view The Mansion House Fund for the unemployed rocketed overnight. Fresh fuel was added to the flames by unemployed demonstrations in Birmingham, Norwich and other centres, and rioting in Leicester The authorities in Glasgow found work for 895 unemployed in *one day* when the news of the Trafalgar Square riots came through. The middle and upper classes throughout the country reacted as if they had suddenly discovered a foreign army camping in their midst. Charity organizations were thrown

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, p. 251.

<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, February 10th, 1886.

up like defence works. "Princess Christian", reported *The Times* on February 12th,

"in view of the extent of the distress in Windsor, is very anxious to organize some cheap dinners for children, and has invited several ladies to assist in carrying out this benevolent object"

The denunciation of the Socialists was unmeasured, even Thomas Hughes (a one-time "Christian Socialist") contributing a shameful letter to *The Times* in which he called them indiscriminately "notorious ruffians", and demanded "a year or two's oakum picking" for "Messrs' Hyndman & Co"<sup>1</sup> By the time his letter was published, summonses had already been served on Hyndman Champion, Williams and Burns.

The Socialists, indeed, were partly fooled themselves into thinking (from the bourgeois panic) that they were seeing (in Morris's words) "the first skirmish of the revolution".<sup>2</sup> Hyndman and Champion gave an interview to the *Pall Mall Gazette* in which they spoke of disappearing for six months, and then reappearing "in a much more serious fashion"<sup>3</sup> The state of tension remained at a critical point for several weeks. The police, as if to revenge their failure of the 8th, repeatedly attacked peaceful meetings. At a monster demonstration in Hyde Park called by the S.D.F. on February 21st the police (even according to *The Times* report) "were compelled to draw their batons and use them without mercy on all who encountered them". One man ridden down by a mounted policeman "received shocking injuries to his face, but it is probable that the rioters will not seek medical assistance . . . for fear of detection".<sup>4</sup> If Hyndman was really out for "advertisement" and wished to threaten the Government with the bogey of revolution, he had struck oil.

The Trafalgar Square riots were a sudden test of Morris's ability as a Socialist leader, and also of the sincerity of his revolutionary opinions. Scarcely a month before, the Leaguers had denounced Hyndman & Co as a "disreputable clique" Moreover, Morris disliked Hyndman's attitude to the unemployed agitation, suspecting that he exploited their misery in an opportunist manner, and put forward unrealistic demands for relief

<sup>1</sup> *The Times*, February 17th, 1886

<sup>2</sup> *Commonweal*, March, 1886

<sup>3</sup> *Pall Mall Gazette*, February 9th, 1886

<sup>4</sup> *The Times*, February 22nd, 1886.

which could only raise false hopes (see p 569)<sup>1</sup> Further, he was—like Engels—contemptuous of Hyndman's revolutionary brag, and believed him a coward at heart With the hysteria of the Press, the alarm of middle-class friends,<sup>2</sup> and waverings within the ranks of the Socialist League, it might have been easy for him to dissociate the League from the events of February 8th, and stand aside from the line of fire A garbled account of a speech at the Hammersmith Liberal Association, which appeared in the *Daily News* on February 11th, and which suggested that he thought the S D F a "dangerous" body and was himself shocked by the riots, provided him with this opportunity He rejected it with contempt, writing to the *News* to contradict its report, and adding

"Under present circumstances I am very loath to be misunderstood especially when members of the Social Democratic Federation are threatened with prosecution for accidents that accompanied their performance of a duty which I myself have frequently to perform"<sup>3</sup>

On the previous day he had written at greater length to reassure the Rev John Glasse at Edinburgh

"As to Monday's riot, of course I look at it as a mistake to go in for a policy of riot, all the more as I feel pretty certain that the Socialists will one day have to fight seriously because though it is quite true that if labour could organize itself properly the enemy could not even dream of resisting, yet that organization could not possibly keep pace with the spread of discontent which will accompany the break-up of the old system Yet I do not agree with you that Monday's affair will hurt the movement I think it will be of service any opposition to law and order in the streets is of use to us, *if the price of it is not too high*. For the rest an English mob is always brutal at any rate until it rises to heroism Altogether taken I think we must look upon this affair as an incident of the Revolution, and so far encouraging the shop wrecking was partly a grotesque practical joke (quite in the English manner) at the expense of the upper classes"<sup>4</sup>

The riots marked for him a break in the docility of the London workers since the Reform demonstrations of 1866—"the surprise

<sup>1</sup> Morris was not alone in believing that no serious alleviation of the condition of the unemployed was possible under capitalism Aveling, writing in the *Commonweal* in March, 1886, declared "it is hopeless to expect any serious and lasting relief, apart from a revolutionary change"

<sup>2</sup> See his reassuring letter to Edward Burne-Jones, *Letters*, pp 247-8.

<sup>3</sup> *Daily News*, February 12th, 1886

<sup>4</sup> Morris to Glasse, February 10th, 1886, *Unpublished Letters*, p 2

of people in finding that the British workmen will not stand everything is extreme"<sup>1</sup> The Council of the League expressed "heartiest sympathy" with the members of the S D F facing prosecution, and Morris himself went bail for Williams and John Burns That action was in itself sufficient to declare his position to the ruling class

In the March number of *Commonweal* he made a careful assessment of the situation His initial analysis was much the same as in his letter to Glasse

"What was the meaning of it? At bottom misery, illuminated by a faint glimmer of hope, raised by the magic word SOCIALISM, the only hope of these days of confusion That was what the crowd represented, whatever other elements were mingled with it"

Some "palliative measures" would, he thought, come of it Also, "We may be suppressed, practically at least, if not formally"

"Of course, opinion cannot be suppressed, we shall find means of disseminating our opinions, but repressive interference with us will make those opinions a kind of mystery, a thing to conjure with Repression will attract the working-classes to us Opinion which must be suppressed is Revolutionary the Socialist Party will become a political force when all these things happen

"Now I should like to say a few words with the utmost seriousness to our comrades and supporters, on the policy of the Socialist League I have said that we have been overtaken unprepared, by a revolutionary incident, but that incident was practically aimless This kind of thing is what many of us have dreaded from the first, and we may be sure that it will happen again and again while the industrial outlook is what it is It is above all things our business to guard against the possible consequences of these surprises At the risk of being misunderstood by hot-heads, I say that our business is more than ever *Education*

"The Gospel of Discontent is in a fair way towards forcing itself on the whole of the workers, how can that discontent be used so as to bring about the New Birth of Society? That is the question we must always have before us It is too much to hope that the *whole* working class can be educated in the aims of Socialism in due time, before other surprises take place But we *must* hope that a strong party can be so educated Educated in economics, in organization, and in administration To such a body of men all the aspirations and vague opinion of the

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, p. 251 Morris himself had written to F S Ellis shortly before the riots (December 26th, 1885) "As to the British working man, to say truth—he could hardly be faster asleep than he is now I sometimes fear he will die asleep, however hard the times grow, like people caught frozen" (Mackail Notebooks, Walthamstow MSS)

oppressed multitudes would drift, and little by little they would be educated by them, if the march of events would give us time, or if not, even half-educated they would follow them in any action which it was necessary to take

"To forge this head of the spear which is to pierce the armour of Capitalism is our business, in which *we must not fail*"

In the absence of such a party, a spontaneous revolt (he continued) would—even if it carried a small Socialist group to power—soon succumb to the counter-revolution

"But, indeed, it would not even come to that History teaches us that no revolts that are without aim are successful even for a time

"The educational process, therefore, the forming a rallying point for definite aims is necessary to our success, but I must guard against misunderstanding We must be no mere debating club, or philosophical society, we must take part in all really popular movements when we can make our own views on them unmistakeably clear, that is a most important part of the education in organization

"Education towards Revolution seems to me to express in three words what our policy should be "

Whatever errors might be found in this article, this is the writing, not of an artist-amateur, but of a responsible Socialist leader no other English Socialist in 1886 was capable of giving so serious an analysis of the riots, or of setting them as firmly into the wider perspectives of the revolutionary struggle If one important point had been clearer to Morris—that participation in all "really popular movements" must be by means of action rather than "sermons"—his judgement would have agreed closely with that of Engels (see p. 480) Moreover, in these passages there is, perhaps, a first shadowy English forecast of the "party of a new type" of Lenin—a party of militant *cadres* educated in Socialist theory, the vanguard of the working class, the spearhead "which is to pierce the armour of Capitalism"

Morris fully understood that the tactics of Hyndman were premature But however "purist" he might be in his theoretical leanings, he viewed events as a revolutionary must do, as they were, and not as he would have liked them to be "The rudest and most unsuccessful attempts at revolution are better", he wrote two months later, than "the periods of quietude" when the workers "learn a dull contentment with their lot":



"With all genuine revolutionary attempts we must sympathize and must at the least express that sympathy, whatever risks its expression may subject us to, and it is little indeed if we can do no more than that"<sup>1</sup>

To "Georgie" Burne-Jones he privately expressed the hope that the "ferment" would sink down again:

"I have often thought that we should be overtaken by the course of events—overtaken unprepared, I mean. It will happen again and again and some of us will cut sorry figures in the confusion. Things industrial are bad—I wish they would better their doing so would not interfere with our propaganda, and would give us some chance of getting at working men with intelligence and some share of leisure. Yet if that will not come about, and the dominating classes will push revolution on us, let it be! the upshot must be good in the end. If you had only suffered as I have from the apathy of the English lower classes (woe's me how low!) you would rejoice at their awakening, however ugly the forms it took. As to my capacity for leadership in this turmoil, believe me, I feel as humble as could be wished, yet after all it is my life, and the work of it, and I must do my best"<sup>2</sup>

This feeling of his personal inadequacy was always with him:

"I wish I were not so damned old. If I were but twenty years younger. But then you know there would be the Female complication somewhere. Best as it is after all"<sup>3</sup>

### VIII *The League in 1886*

The League's support for the S.D.F. in this moment of crisis, the common fight of the two bodies for the freedom of the streets during the summer, co-operation in the annual meeting for the celebration of the Commune—all these augured well for joint action in the future. But Hyndman and the old guard of the L.E.L. were irreconcilable. Morris approached the S.D.F. with the suggestion that the Trafalgar Square meeting on August 29th, 1886, to greet Jack Williams on his release from prison after the Bell Street incident should be a joint affair. From his Olympian heights Hyndman replied in aggrieved tones. Morris *himself* would be welcome as a speaker at the S.D.F. meeting (this was one of several attempts by the S.D.F. to "capture" Morris from the League)

<sup>1</sup> *Commonweal*, May 1st, 1886, Editorial by Morris and Bax

<sup>2</sup> *Letters*, p. 248      <sup>3</sup> Morris to Edward Burne-Jones, *ibid.*, p. 248

"Any ill-feeling that may have existed—as of course I thought not unjustifiably—on my part is *quite* at an end. The reasons our people have for declining joint action with the Socialist League are however sufficient .

"At Dod Street there was a distinct breach of faith, and much mischief was made. Then your body passed a resolution and published it in all the capitalist press denouncing us as a 'disreputable gang'. We nevertheless took part in the Commune affair at South Place when every effort was made by Lane the Chairman to snub our men and we were prevented as far as possible from selling our paper in the Hall. After our trial at the Old Bailey one of the men who came up with you the other night—who is always very careful to keep himself out of danger, I notice—denounced Burns, Champion, Williams and myself as 'cowards' in your own rooms. This statement was received with cheers. Wherever it has been at all possible your people have tried, as at Hull, Croydon, Hackney, Paddington, and now at Clerkenwell, to break up our Branches. Some of these attempts, of which I am sure you are not cognisant, have been of the meanest and dirtiest character.

"All this while, too, two at least of your members, Mahon, now at Leeds, and Aveling, have never lost a chance of vilifying members of our body in the American and other foreign Press. How *can* we make common cause with people who are perpetually calling us all liars, rogues, intriguers, etc. ? From first to last we have refrained from attacking the League in any way."

The letter then embraced Hyndman's grievances against the Fabians, and Fitzgerald's Socialist Union, and concluded

"If men act altogether in an anti-Socialist sense surely the mere fact that they call themselves Socialists does not render it incumbent upon other Socialists, who have been throughout the injured party, to run the risk of further insult."<sup>1</sup>

Humph! No mention of the fact that the two comrades Williams and Mainwaring had spoken together at Bell Street, been tried together, and that Morris and Hyndman had together gone to give witness on their behalf. The differences seemed to Morris "preposterously petty", Hyndman "stiff and stately, playing the big man, and complaining of being ill-treated by us, which was a Wolf and Lamb business". "Well, I think I have done with that lot. Why will people quarrel when they have a serious end in view?"<sup>2</sup> In Glasgow, too, the old friction continued, and Morris wrote wearily to Glasier "I'm sorry to hear about the S D F. I

<sup>1</sup> Brit Mus Add MSS 45345

<sup>2</sup> Mackail, II, pp 162-3

thought some of those I saw were good sort of chaps. However, you must take their place now."<sup>1</sup> A comrade in Farnham wrote to *Commonweal* early in 1887

"We Socialists in small towns or villages feel especially the need of unity and good-feeling, [and] cannot but deplore and feel ashamed of this bad-blooded rivalry, which makes the Cause look ridiculous, and gives occasion to the common enemy to laugh in his sleeve at us. It must be comic to witness the complacent swagger of *Justice*, and the occasional mutter of the *Commonweal*, as of some sulky boy who has been teased by his fellows."<sup>2</sup>

What, in fact, had the League achieved in its first two years of existence?

In terms of membership, a slow but gradual increase was to be recorded. Starting with a handful of supporters in January, 1885, it had climbed by the Annual Conference in July to a membership of about 230, with branches at Hammersmith, Bloomsbury, Merton Abbey, Stratford, North London, Leeds, Bradford, Oxford, and a central branch for the unattached. The Labour Emancipation League was still affiliated, but its Mile End and Stratford branches merged in the League, and only its branch at Hoxton remained independent. The Scottish Land and Labour League had branches at Glasgow and Edinburgh. Of the first number of *Commonweal* 5,000 copies had been sold, but thereafter the circulation dropped to a regular average fluctuating between 2,000 and 3,000.<sup>3</sup> During the next twelve months new branches were opened at Manchester, Oldham, Leicester, Marylebone, Mile End, South London, Dublin, Birmingham, Croydon, Norwich, Hackney and Clerkenwell. At the Annual Conference in June, 1886, nineteen of these branches were represented, and of the five which sent no delegates, only one, Stratford, appears to have been inactive. Not one branch had totally lapsed; moreover, the Scottish Land and Labour League appeared now to be maintaining an existence *alongside* League branches in Edinburgh and Glasgow. No figures were published of the total membership of the League, but Engels (who was well informed) told Bebel in April, 1886, "at the very most the two organizations [S D F and S L] have not 2,000 paying members between them nor their papers

<sup>1</sup> Glasier MSS, February 3rd, 1887      <sup>2</sup> *Commonweal*, February 5th, 1887

<sup>3</sup> Sales of *Commonweal* (Hammersmith Minutes) 2,400, March 21st, 1886, 2,600, July 25th, 1886, 2,600 ("a decrease"), August 7th, 1887

5,000 readers" <sup>1</sup> The League could claim half of this readership, and perhaps 600 or 700 of the members <sup>2</sup>

In July, 1886, Mahon brought the Hull members of the S D F into the League and, before the end of the year, further branches were opened at Ipswich, Bingley, Fulham, Hamilton (in the Lanarkshire mining area), Mitcham, and Lancaster Until the Annual Conference of May, 1887, the League's membership was climbing, and—on the basis of delegation at the Conference—it would seem to have come near to the 1,000 mark At this Conference new branches were represented from Walsall and North Shields, but those at Stratford, Oldham, Manchester, Marylebone, Mile End, South London, Dublin, Birmingham and Fulham seem either to have merged into other branches or to have lapsed By the second half of 1886 the League was certainly being outstripped in membership by the S D F in London, the Midlands and Lancashire, and only in Norwich, West Yorkshire and Scotland was it holding or gaining ground In London at the end of 1886 Hyndman was crowing over the dead body of the League, provoking an unusually angry response from Morris in a private letter to Glasier

"As to what he says about the League in London, that be damned! As a party of principle, we are not likely to number as many members as an opportunist body, but we have several solid and increasing branches here A good South London branch we Hammersmith chaps have formed a Fulham one now flourishing, Hackney is not bad, Hoxton is good, Mile End is being reorganised North London is much improved, Bloomsbury is very much so, Mitcham has been set on its legs by Kitz, Croydon is sound, though somewhat sleepy Of course we ought to do much more, but we are suffering from the lack of energetic initiative men, who are not overburdened with work and responsibilities" <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Marx-Engels Sel Cor*, p 448

<sup>2</sup> See also H M Pelling, *op cit*, p 47, note on League membership Dr Pelling refers to "an undated statement of the League signed by J L Mahon, and probably referring to summer 1886", which gives the total membership as 393 But since Mahon was no longer Secretary in 1886, this statement must refer to some date in 1885 Membership of the League seems to have progressed from 230 in July, 1885, 393(?), autumn, 1885, 550, January, 1886, to 600 or 700 members in the summer of 1886, but, as Dr Pelling points out, some of these members were not paid up, and branch membership quotas were not received regularly at Farringdon Road

<sup>3</sup> Glasier, *op cit*, p 187

The reluctance of "energetic initiative men"—men of the calibre of Mahon, Binning, Mainwaring and Maguire, who had thrown in their lot with the League in 1885—to join the League in 1886 and 1887 can be traced to a number of causes. In the first place, the leadership of the League was lacking in unity, vigour and organizational ability. The Council was solely a London body and torn by dissension, not only on important political issues, but also upon the most trivial questions of personality. On more than one occasion members of one faction on the Council tabled motions attacking members of the opposite faction on quite inadequate grounds. Resignations took place almost monthly. In November, 1885, Joseph Lane resigned "from the Council of the League called Socialist" because an offer by a friend to put up a brass plate outside the League's offices had been negatived.<sup>1</sup> In the same month Henry Charles, J. L. Mahon and two others resigned (with better grounds) because Council meetings were "a sheer waste of time", and in protest at "the unwarranted and extravagant expenditure of money by the Council", defrayed chiefly by Morris.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, useful Council members like Frank Kitz and Robert Banner were prevented from attending "owing to want of work, and of course want of money".<sup>3</sup> Finally, in June, 1886, Thomas Binning, in a notable letter of resignation, brought a serious list of accusations against the Council and its proceedings. Meetings, he declared, were disorderly and inclusive. The League was without either discipline or serious organization. Its affairs were largely dominated by a London faction.

"I earnestly hope the League is not going to degenerate into a mere Quixotic debating society for the discussion of philosophical fads. I care not how angelic may be the theories of Anarchists or Anarchist-Communists. I contend that the real solid basis of the Revolutionary movement is the economic question. If the League means business let it not waste time in metaphysical subtleties such as the precise shade of difference between 'Rules' and 'Arrangements', etc."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Lane to Council, S L, November 2nd, 1885, S L Correspondence, Int Inst Soc Hist

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, J. L. Mahon to Council, S L, October 19th, 1885. R. Beckett (Secretary, North London Branch) to Council, December 28th, 1885, etc

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, R. Banner to Secretary, S L, April 23rd, 1885

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, T. Binning to Council S L, June 3rd, 1886

If the centre was indeed as weak as this, there is no cause for wonder that progress was slow.

It should be recalled, however, that Morris held control over *Commonweal*, and into its pages none of these squabbles were allowed to enter. The paper served as a link with a genuine movement both in London and the provinces which deserved a much better leadership than it got. Moreover, it would be an error to pass judgement on the League on the evidence of the proceedings of its London Council alone. The dramatic events of these two years were taking place, not in 75 Farringdon Road, but at the open-air pitches and in the small rooms where Socialist ideas were first reaching the workers. In Leeds, for example, the propaganda was driven forward by Tom Maguire, who was scarcely twenty years old. This highly gifted young Catholic worker picked up a copy of *The Christian Socialist* from the Secular Hall bookstall in 1883. Within a few months he was himself contributing to the correspondence column of the paper. There was hardly another Socialist to be found in Leeds, and so—he took to the street corner, and the “popular spouting-place”, Vicar’s Croft, and within a few months a handful of others had gathered round him, attracted perhaps in the same way as Alf Mattison, a young engineer of thoughtful, scholarly temperament.

“Early in 1885 . . . strolling through the Market-place of Leeds, my attention was attracted by a pale but pleasant-featured young fellow, who in a clear voice was speaking to a motley crowd. After listening for a while I began to feel a strange sympathy with his remarks, and what is more—a sudden interest in and liking for the speaker, and I remember how impatiently I waited for his reappearance on the following Sunday.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1884 Maguire formed a small branch of the S D F, and soon made his influence felt. On friendly terms with J. L. Mahon, and a warm admirer of Morris, he brought the eight or ten Leeds Socialists across to the League in January, 1885. Every Sunday open-air meetings were held, at which Maguire was pursued with the “utmost spite” by a section of the Irish Catholics.<sup>2</sup> “We

<sup>1</sup> *Tom Maguire: a Remembrance* (1895), p. xiii.

<sup>2</sup> J. L. Mahon to Council, S. L., January 23rd, 1886, describing the Leeds Branch as “a small number of first-rate men” with influence in the Leeds A. S. E. and among the miners of Hunslet, S. L. Correspondence, Int. Inst. Soc. Hist.

shall live their narrow fury down", he wrote confidently to the Council in September, 1885 and nothing could drive Maguire and his comrades from the streets. Numbering twenty at the most early in 1886, the branch was a centre of propaganda which extended to many points in the West Riding. twice a month four or five of the branch would mix propaganda and pleasure, sallying out to the textile villages, tramping through the South Yorkshire coalfield or through the Dales, holding meetings and selling literature on the way.

Similar ardour and self-sacrifice was to be found in the early days of the branch at Norwich, which was at one time to become the largest branch in the League. The leading spirit here was Fred Slaughter, a young man with a small income which enabled him to run a café as a centre for the movement. Early in 1885 he promoted "The Norwich Pioneer Class for the discussion of Socialism", from which eleven members were drawn to found a branch of the League. A visit from Morris, a correspondence in the Press, and the accession of two able speakers, C. W. Mowbray (from London) and the young Fred Henderson (from Bradford), brought additional support. As at Leeds, the Norwich Leaguers carried their propaganda to the countryside,

"and on Friday nights our members have tramped the six miles along a bad road in all kinds of weather, always sure of finding the room filled with men anxious to hear the new gospel."

in the village of St Faith's.<sup>1</sup> But, unlike some of the more "purist" branches, the Norwich Leaguers drove hard for working-class support, headed the unemployed agitation, and organized torchlight processions. By Easter, 1886, the branch was beginning to break through to the masses, and was drawing audiences of 1,000 to its open-air meetings in the Market Place. From this time onwards, for the next twelve months, its membership rose rapidly.

But Leeds and Norwich were among the most successful branches. In other centres, enthusiastic propaganda gave way under the pressure of poverty, opposition, apathy or victimization. Edinburgh, which started early in 1885 with a meeting over 500 strong, and a nominal membership of fifty, was reduced

<sup>1</sup> MS Notes on the History of Norwich Socialist League, written about 1888, among Nettlau Collection, Int Inst Soc Hist.

to five or six active members in December of the same year. Two of its best speakers, Andreas Scheu and A. K. Donald, had left the city. The Secretary was complaining of the apathy of "the mob", and of Edinburgh as the "home of Whiggery and orthodoxy". The branch was crippled by lack of money, and urgently requested another visit from "Mr Morris, from whose last appearance here we profited to the extent of about 30s"<sup>1</sup> At Glasgow the story was more hopeful, and Edinburgh was to see a great improvement in 1887. But at Leicester, after an initial burst of enthusiasm, a similar tale of set-backs was reported "We, the officers . . . have done all we could to get meetings & members . . . but have got nothing but debts for our pains"<sup>2</sup> Money due to the League for *Commonweals* could not be sent in, since the branch had local debts which must be settled first, so that its enemies "could not taunt us with that matter". From Nottingham came a cancellation of an order for the paper. "we are not in a position to bear any loss, being all working men and many out of work"<sup>3</sup> At Huntingdon several workmen "would become members of the League, only they are afraid of their employers. Men in Huntingdon dare not express their honest opinion, in such a hot-bed of Toryism"<sup>4</sup> At Birmingham the old Chartist, Sketchley, was involved in domestic troubles, and the branch was dissolved through "indifference" within and the bitterest opposition without, in November, 1886.<sup>5</sup> At Bradford the small branch was making headway but it could not find a room, and the proprietor of Laycock's Rooms was warned by the police to prevent the Socialists from meeting on his premises.<sup>6</sup> Fred Pickles wrote of

<sup>1</sup> J. A. Tait (Secretary, Edinburgh S.L.) to Secretary S.L., December 21st, 1885, S.L. Correspondence, Int. Inst. Soc. Hist. Tait states in this letter that the local Branch of the S.D.F. after a temporary success during the autumn during a visit from J. Hunter Watts was now also reduced to three, four, or six regulars.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Copeland to Secretary, S.L. (n.d.)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, J. Proctor Hardie (Secretary, Nottingham and District Social-Democratic League) to Secretary, S.L., March 5th, 1886.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, E. Boyle to Secretary, S.L., December 7th, 1886.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* The Dublin S.L. (Secretaries, Samuel Hayes and Michael Gabriel) was never above sixteen in strength. Correspondence shows a Dublin Democratic Assn., sixty strong, in 1884 collapsed as a result of opposition from the National League.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Fred Pickles to Secretary, S.L., February 23rd, 1886.



the "very uphill work . . the sneering incredulousness, apathy & lack of enthusiasm we meet with is worse than downright opposition, of which we also get plenty"<sup>1</sup> At Wandsworth a comrade wrote with the same tale: the police had warned the publicans not to permit their meetings. The job of propaganda was hard enough in every part of the country, even without the artificial obstacles which the indiscipline and purism of the Council set in the way

It was, however, the *political* weakness of the League which was the prime factor in discouraging its own membership. What did the Leaguers *do*? The answer is *only* the propaganda of meetings and the written word. Powerful as the League's influence was, in many centres, in preparing the minds of the workers for Socialism, whenever any issue arose when the workers were forced into action against the capitalist system, its Council adopted a "neutralist" attitude. The occasions when the League came into real prominence in 1886 were the result, not so much of its own propaganda, as of the oppression of the police or the agitation of the S.D.F. There was a constant danger of degeneration of several kinds. First, in the proletarian branches of the East End, "purism" could easily pass into anarchism and bloodthirsty phrase-mongering. Morris was puzzled by these groups, and felt that something was wrong, although he placed the failing on to himself. "On Sunday I went a-preaching Stepney way", he wrote to "Georgie" Burne-Jones in May, 1885. The visit "intensely depressed" him, lecturing to twenty people in a small and dirty room among "the vast mass of utter shabbiness and uneventfulness"

"It took the fire out of my fine periods, I can tell you. it is a great drawback that I can't *talk* to them roughly and unaffectedly. Also I would like to know what amount of real feeling underlies their bombastic revolutionary talk when they get to that. I don't seem to have got at them yet—you see this great class gulf lies between us."<sup>2</sup>

Morris's fight against reformism and opportunism could easily overbalance into the "bombastic talk" satirized by Gissing in *Demos*.

"Half measures . . can only result in delaying the Revolution. . .

<sup>1</sup> S.L. Correspondence, Fred Pickles to Secretary, S.L., June 17th, 1885

<sup>2</sup> *Letters*, p. 237

Away with these palliatives, let us rejoice when we see working men starving and ill-clad, for in that way their eyes will be opened. The brute who gets the uttermost farthing out of the toil of his wage-slaves is more a friend to us and our cause than any namby-pamby Socialist . . ."

This satire was by no means wide of the mark where Kitz and some of the growing anarchist section were concerned. Moreover (although it would be a libel to apply it to Morris) it found a counterpart among friends of Morris, like Sparling, and Charlie Faulkner of Oxford (dubbed by the *Oxford Magazine* an "alehouse anarchist") who wrote to Lane on behalf of the Oxford Branch in May, 1887, that they had—

"refused to have anything to do with Parliamentary action. The opinion was almost unanimous against having anything less than Revolution. The very idea of mere reform is to keep the present institutions going. For my own part I think all such movements as '8-hours a day' are just as reactionary as allotment schemes. The passing of such measures would, I dare say, take off the immediate pressure and so far would of course have the effect of checking the socialistic movement. It is the Tories who, if they had any brains, would promote such half-hearted legislation." <sup>1</sup>

This "bombast" was, of course, shared by Hyndman and some of the S.D.F. as well. "Shouting about revolution", Engels commented, "is utter nonsense here among the totally unprepared masses, and has the effect of scaring away the proletariat, only exciting the demoralized elements".<sup>2</sup> But bombast plus purism equalled anarchism, as events were to prove.

Second, branches of the League were weakened simply from hopelessness and boredom. Again and again they were formed with enthusiasm: sallied out into the streets and sold the *Commonweal* and then, caught in the endless round of open-air pitch, *Commonweal* sales, lectures, with no prospect of any change until the "Revolution", members began to drop out. This always happens to any movement in unfavourable periods but it happened to the League at a time when people were not only

<sup>1</sup> C. J. Faulkner to Joseph Lane, May 18th, 1887, Brit. Mus. Add. MSS. 46345. At the same time, Faulkner (from the environment of a university city) could understand the sectarianism of "pushing atheism to the fore", and criticized Lane's *Manifesto* on this count.

<sup>2</sup> *Marx-Engels Selected Correspondence*, p. 447.

interested in their message, but wanted to *do* something about it as well. Where the branches kept a continually *expanding* propaganda combined with social activities, they held their membership. In Norwich, as we have seen, the League took part in the unemployed agitation, and, Fred Henderson recalled, "we carried on a continuous propaganda in the villages all round . . . in many we held a meeting once a week for a year, even two years"<sup>1</sup>. At Glasgow, Edinburgh, Oxford, Bradford and Leeds similar propaganda outings were a regular feature of branch life, and the best London branches were continually holding open-air meetings in new centres. Such branches were held together by a really remarkable spirit of comradeship—an enthusiastic sense of adventure. "Our business", related Alf Mattison, "was to make Socialists to go on making 'em until we had roped in all the human race. In some old way or other our ideal Common-wealth would then come about. . . ."<sup>2</sup> But even the finest enthusiasm was bound to flag, especially in London where propaganda outings to districts of the East End had little charm, when the objective seemed no nearer and few practical results of the propaganda could be seen.

Morris's own branch at Hammersmith provides an example of the difficulties imposed on the League by its own purism. From its formation (as a branch of the Democratic Federation) in June, 1884, until the end of 1886, no fewer than 117 members were posted, and of these one only resigned formally. Yet, in August, 1886, only forty members were paid up and in "good standing", while its Annual Meeting in March, 1887, had to be adjourned because only twelve were in attendance—and when it was resumed in April the attendance was nine!<sup>3</sup> But, *at the same time*, the open-air propaganda was going briskly, with audiences of 200 and more at Walham Green in the worst winter months, and good sales of *Commonweal*,<sup>4</sup> while the regular Sunday evening lectures in the Hammersmith clubroom were well attended.

<sup>1</sup> Reg Groves, *Sharpen the Sickle*, pp. 100 f.

<sup>2</sup> *Leeds Weekly Citizen*, October 4th, 1929.    <sup>3</sup> Hammersmith Minutes, *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* The Branch started open-air propaganda, June, 1885, abandoned it through lack of support in July, and resumed in August. Average branch sales of *Commonweal* in 1885 were five quire and just over five quire during 1886. The audience at Walham Green climbed to its peak, about 500, on November 7th, 1886: at this meeting seventy-two *Commonweals* were sold, about twenty

The minority of active members were very active indeed but the propaganda was not bringing the great majority of the members to take part

Here a third source of danger within the League may be found. Since the propaganda was largely "educational" (and it was clear that the "Revolution" was not imminent) the League seemed rather safer to some of the timid than the S D F, and discussions tended to become abstract and detached from events. Hence, also, an influx of inactive middle-class people to the Hammersmith lecture-room, drawn partly by Morris's own reputation. After all, if the main strategy of the League was to *make Socialists* by educational means, there was little left to discuss but Socialism itself, and all sorts of remote speculations about aspects of life under Socialism became rife. Moreover, when a lecture was to be held every week, it could not deal with the same fundamental principles again and again and again. All kinds of subjects came under discussion: lecturers from other societies—Fabians, Anarchists, all and sundry—who could be relied upon to get up a "good discussion". Between October, 1886, and October, 1887, there was a marked tendency for the Hammersmith branch to include more cultural subjects among their lectures, and to fetch in outsiders more frequently.<sup>1</sup> Gissing (an unfriendly observer) who was visiting branches of the League for "copy" in 1886, noted the tendency in Hammersmith:

"The people who occupied the benches were obviously of a different stamp from those at the Hoxton meeting place. There were perhaps a dozen artisans of intensely sober appearance, and the rest were men and women who certainly had never wrought with their hands. Of the men other than the artisans the majority were young, and showed the countenance which bespeaks meritorious intelligence rather than ardour of heart or brain. It needed but a glance over this assembly

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more than the usual total on this site. Other Hammersmith sites were Welbie Road, Beedon Road, Starch Green, and Acton Green. Propaganda continued throughout the winter: on January 5th, 1887, Morris spoke to 100 on Acton Green, January 23rd, 1887, there were sixty to eighty on Walham Green, and on February 6th, 200.

<sup>1</sup> Lecturers at Hammersmith over this period included G. B. Shaw (several times), Graham Wallas (Education), Sidney Webb (Economic Rent), Bax (The New Ethic), Walter Crane (The Architecture of Art), Ernest Rhys (The New Poetry), Mrs. Bland, Hubert Bland and Sidney Olivier, as well as League speakers on more immediate topics.

to understand how very theoretical were the convictions that had brought its members together”<sup>1</sup>

The evidence would suggest that Gissing was very close to the mark.

Already, by the latter part of 1886, the League had *failed* in the object which on its formation both Morris and Engels had hoped to see it accomplish—the creation of an educated and disciplined nucleus of Socialists who might bring the mass movement under their leadership when it arose. The S D F., hampered by Hyndman’s doctrinaire and opportunist leadership, was failing also. Where the Council of the League stood aside from the growing mass movement, in the name of “pure” Socialism, Hyndman’s group alienated the masses by dogmatism and hostility to the trade union and Radical movements. The rank and file of both bodies had played their part in stirring the people, by the devotion and enthusiasm with which they had spread the ideas of Socialism abroad. But it was with justice that Engels wrote to Bebel in August, 1886.

“Still practically nothing doing . . . as many sects as heads . . . The S D F has at any rate a programme and a certain discipline, but it has absolutely no support among the masses . . . The League is passing through a crisis . . . Morris . . . has fallen headlong over the phrase ‘revolution’ and become a victim of the anarchists . . . Bax is very talented and understands something—but after the fashion of philosophers has concocted his own form of socialism which he takes for the true Marxist theory and does a lot of damage with it . . . However, this is an infantile disease in his case and will pass, it is only a pity that this process is being gone through in public . . . Aveling is forced to work so hard for his daily bread that he also is not able to do much studying, he is the only one I meet regularly”<sup>2</sup>

At the end of November, 1886, Engels wrote to Sorge that “the labour movement is beginning here, and no mistake”, but the Socialist League “has embarked on a dogfight with the anarchists and has no time to take an interest in the living movement going on under its very nose”. That dogfight was to go on for two years. And when it was finished with, the League was to all intents and purposes a dying organization

<sup>1</sup> G Gissing, *Demos*, Ch XVII.

<sup>2</sup> Engels to Bebel, August 18th, 1886, *Labour Monthly*, December, 1933.

## IX William Morris, Agitator

One fact stands beyond question in these two years of propaganda—the noble personal example of William Morris. The fact that one judges his actions (and his errors) not as those of a Socialist sympathizer, nor as an intellectual ally, but as a leader of the Socialist movement, brings home the change that had taken place in the author of *The Earthly Paradise*. He did not take this position by choice—it was forced upon him. Bax was too unpractical and quarrelsome. Aveling too busy and too little trusted: Eleanor too inexperienced—neither Lane nor Kitz would have taken the responsibility. Someone had to drive things forward, and it was soon clear that Morris must do it. "I feel miserably uncomfortable at having any leadership put upon me", he wrote to Joynes in February, 1885, "but I hope I shall be able to learn to do whatever is necessary."<sup>1</sup> In October of the next year he wrote to "Georgie" Burne-Jones, in a humorous reference to Lane and his party, who rejected all "leadership" on principle.

"In spite of all the self-denying ordinances of us semi-anarchists, I grieve to have to say that some sort of leadership is required, and that in our section I unfortunately supply that want."<sup>2</sup>

His official position was that of Treasurer (until his place was taken by Philip Webb) and Editor of the *Commonweal*. The League had no Chairman, and the paid full-time Secretary was an executive officer rather than leader. If anyone was to keep a constant check on all decisions, give advice to branches, and shape a consistent policy, it had to be Morris.

He did it without complaint. It is absolutely impossible to understand how he found time for all his activities, at the same time keeping some supervision over the Firm, and (before the end of 1886) launching on a translation of Homer as well. In these two years he wrote *The Pilgrims of Hope*, *The Dream of John Ball*, and the first part of *Socialism From the Root Up*. articles, notes and Editorials for the *Commonweal*. he delivered something like 120 lectures, about fifteen of which (at the least) were written out in long-hand and are permanent contributions to Socialist theory. he attended the weekly Executive Council meeting of the League,

<sup>1</sup> May Morris, II, p. 172.<sup>2</sup> Mackail, II, p. 149

the Ways and Means Committee, and goodness knows how many other meetings besides—he made tours of the provinces, breaking new ground, and consolidating old branches—Dublin, Scotland, Yorkshire and Lancashire, the Potteries, East Anglia and a dozen other centres. He was present at sixty out of the ninety-nine meetings of the *Committee* of the Hammersmith Branch, at some of which only two or three others troubled to attend; and in addition was often in the Chair at the Sunday evening lectures—if he was not lecturing elsewhere himself. He spoke at scores of open-air meetings, chaired them, carried the banner, sold literature, took round the hat for collections. He acted as a sandwich-man, between placards advertising *Commonweal*. He gave a hand with the smallest mechanical details of office or branch organization, and wrote basketfuls of correspondence. He edited the *Commonweal*. He attended the police-courts. He drew up balance-sheets, and subsidized the whole movement with his money. He helped with social evenings, gave readings of his own work or wrote special poems, entertained speakers, and made personal contacts with people sympathetic to the movement. He—but one old member of the League, the late Mr Ambrose Barker, put the matter in a nutshell. “Who were the best workers in the League?” I asked. The answer came without hesitation. “William Morris.”

“‘Tis all meeting and lecture, lecture & meeting with a little writing interspersed”, he wrote to his daughter Jenny.<sup>1</sup> Successive biographers have lamented this “waste” of Morris’s energies and his genius. They need not have troubled. Morris himself gave the answer to them, when, lying on his back crippled with gout after the Dod Street affair, “Georgie” Burne-Jones tried to persuade him to give up his active work for the Cause:

“You see, having joined a movement, I must do what I can while I last, that is a matter of duty. All this work I have pulled upon my own head, and though in detail much of it is repulsive to the last degree, I still hold that I did not do so without due consideration. Anyhow, it seems to me that I can be of use, therefore I am impelled to make myself useful.”

“You see, my dear, I can’t help it. The ideas which have taken hold of me will not let me rest—nor can I see anything else worth thinking of. How can it be otherwise, when to me society, which to many seems

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, p. 255

an orderly arrangement for allowing decent people to get through their lives creditably and with some pleasure, seems mere cannibalism, nay worse — is grown so corrupt, so steeped in hypocrisy and lies, that one turns from one stratum of it to another with hopeless loathing. One must turn to hope, and only in one direction do I see it—on the road to Revolution everything else is gone now" <sup>1</sup>

Through all the turns and twists of the movement, his faith was never shaken. "I am in low spirits about the prospects of our 'party', if I can dignify a little knot of men with such a word", he wrote in May, 1885

"You see we are such a few, and hard as we work we don't seem to pick up people to take our places when we demit. All this you understand is only said about the petty skirmish of outposts, the fight of a corporal's guard, in which I am immediately concerned. I have [no] more faith than a grain of mustard seed in the future history of 'civilization', which I know now is doomed to destruction, and probably before very long what a joy it is to think of! and how often it consoles me to think of barbarism once more flooding the world, and real feelings and passions, however rudimentary, taking the place of our wretched hypocrisies. With this thought in my mind all the history of the past is lighted up and lives again to me. I used really to despair once because I thought that the idiots of our day call progress would go on perfecting itself happily. I know now that all that will have a sudden check" <sup>2</sup>

Nothing disturbed his confidence in the growth of the movement, nor did he make the mistake of identifying his own efforts in the League with the march of history. "Even such things as this", he wrote of one quarrel, "the army setting off to conquer all the world turning back to burn Jack's pigstye, and tumbling drunk into the fire—even this don't shake me — means one must use the best one can get but one thing I won't do, wait for ever till perfect means are made for very imperfect me to work with" <sup>3</sup>

And in March, 1886, he wrote to Carruthers

"I must say that in spite of all faults and follies of the party I am encouraged about the movement. I wish only I was more able in dealing with men, I am fit for little but looking on" <sup>4</sup>

He knew perfectly well that there was an easier alternative, with little obvious compromise

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, pp 241-2

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p 236

<sup>3</sup> Mackail, II, p 151

<sup>4</sup> *Letters*, p 252



"I do not love contention, I even shrink from it with indifferent persons. Indeed I know that all my faults lie on the other side—love of ease, dreaminess, sloth, sloppy good-nature, are what I chiefly accuse myself of. All these would not have been hurt by my being a 'moderate Socialist', nor need I have forgone a good share of the satisfaction of vainglory for in such a party I could easily have been a leader, nay, perhaps *the* leader, whereas amidst our rough work I can scarcely be a leader at all and certainly do not care to be. I say this because I feel that a very little self-deception would have landed me among the moderates. But self-deception it would have been."<sup>1</sup>

And so John Ball is made to muse in prison

"Hadst thou kept thy tongue between thy teeth thou mightest have been something, if it had been but a parson of a town, and comfortable to many a poor man, and then mightest thou have clad here and there the naked back, and filled the empty belly, and holpen many, and men would have spoken well of thee, and of thyself thou hadst thought well, and all this hast thou lost for lack of a word here and there to some great man, and a little winking of the eyes amidst murder and wrong and untruth."

The passage is profound—because the "moderate" is shown, not as an apostate, a black-hearted traitor, but as a self-deceiver, a man who flatters his own conscience to hide his own cowardice. In it the whole moral degeneration of reformism is foreseen—its complacency, its "good intentions", its pious phrases, its blind eye to imperialism, exploitation and war. This temptation Morris, too, had felt. It was perhaps the greatest action of his life when he thrust it aside. By his sacrifices for the "Cause", the very stature of the Cause itself was made to grow. His example will enrich the British Socialist tradition for so long as it persists, giving to it its own special character of "exalted brotherhood and hope". And whatever he gave to the Cause was given back to him tenfold in his new joy. "As to my 'not looking round'", he wrote in gentle rebuke to "Georgie" Burne-Jones—"Why it seems to me that no hour of the day passes that the whole world does not show itself to me."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mackail, II, p. 158

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, II, p. 151.