

CHAPTER VI

THE LAST YEARS OF THE SOCIALIST LEAGUE

I Under an Elm Tree

"Up at the League, says a friend, there had been one night a brisk conversational discussion, as to what would happen on the Morrow of the Revolution "

"There were six persons present, and consequently six sections of the party were represented, four of which had strong but divergent Anarchist opinions. One of the sections, says our friend, a man whom he knows very well indeed, sat almost silent at the beginning of the discussion, but at last got drawn into it, and finished by roaring out very loud, and damning all the rest for fools, after which befell a period of noise, and then a lull, during which the aforesaid section, having said good-night very amicably, took his way home by himself to a western suburb "

AND so the opening of *News from Nowhere* gives us an authentic description of the League, as Morris, with humorous self-criticism, saw it in its last two years of half-effective existence

During the previous two years, MORRIS had been working with every faculty strained to the extreme. Perhaps this had brought upon him a nervous and creative fatigue, as well as physical exhaustion. As early as 1884 he had expressed the fear to Andreas Scheu that if he were to become too involved in " 'politics', i e., intrigue" he would be "no use to the cause as a writer" ¹ Events had forced him into prominence, and in the first flush of successful propagandist activity, in 1885 and 1886—the years of *The Pilgrims of Hope* and *The Dream of John Ball*—political action and imaginative vitality had each reinforced the other. But 1887 and the first months of 1888—the period of faction squabbles within the League—saw a flagging of his creative powers and even a certain narrowing of his responses to life as revealed in his private letters. "I had three very good days at Kelmscott", he wrote to "Georgie" Burne-Jones in September, 1887.

¹ *Letters*, p. 204

"Once or twice I had that delightful quickening of perception by which everything gets emphasised and brightened, and the commonest landscape looks lovely—anxieties and worries, though remembered, yet no weight on one's spirits—Heaven in short It comes not very commonly even in one's younger and brighter days, and doesn't quite leave one even in the times of combat"¹

But pressure of work, anxieties about the League, made these moments rare in 1887 He was becoming a stranger at Kelmscott Manor, visiting the Oxfordshire countryside only for rare and rapid visits when the work at the League allowed him.

After the Annual Conference of 1888, for the first time since 1884, he allowed himself to relax Early in August he took part in a strenuous long week-end of propaganda with the Norwich Branch² Then, in the middle of August, he went down to Kelmscott and lingered there through September until October, completing *The House of the Wolfings*, making his first investigations into the art of printing, busying himself with the affairs of *Commonweal*, the Anti-Scrape and the Film The easing of months of tension seemed to bring with it a re-awakening of his dormant senses He wrote about family affairs, cooking and fishing, to his daughter "Jenny"

"There are two tall hollyhocks (O so tall) by the strawberries, one white, one a very pretty red Woke up this morning to a most splendid but very stormy sunrise The nights have been fine, and the moon rises her old way from behind the great barn"³

"Her old way"—there is an unmistakable sense of something which had been forgotten, beginning once again to return. "I saw an owl last night", he wrote to another friend, "come sailing along, and suddenly turn head over heels and down in the grass, after a mouse I suppose such a queer action I never saw"⁴ Small indications, perhaps, and yet the foretaste of that flooding sense of "the earth and the growth of it and the life of it" which pervades *News from Nowhere* and the serene peace of the last prose romances.

¹ *Letters*, p 275

² For an account of the Norwich visit, see *Letters*, pp 294-5, and *Commonweal*, August 25th, 1888 ("Socialist Work at Norwich", by Morris) See also Fred Henderson's reminiscences in Groves, *Sharpen the Sickle*, pp 100 ff

³ *Letters*, p 297

⁴ *Ibid*, p 297.

In the summer of 1889 the returning tide of feeling was revealed in what must surely be the most unusual piece of Socialist "propaganda" ever written—*Under an Elm-Tree, or, Thoughts in the Country-side*.¹ The most brilliant editor could never have planned such a feature article for a Socialist paper as this no one but Morris could have conceived it. And yet how strangely moving and true to his genius this short piece is—with its deliberate waywardness, its intermingling of Socialist homily and of the leisurely lyricism of the Oxfordshire countryside! It opens with the conventional summer scene of the poet

"Midsummer in the country—here you may walk between the fields and hedges that are as it were one huge nosegay for you, redolent of bean-flowers and clover and sweet hay and elder-blossom. The river down yonder barred across here and there with the pearly white-flowered water-weeds, every yard of its banks a treasure of delicate design, meadowsweet and dewberry, and comfrey and bed-straw."

Next, the scene is placed within the lengthening perspective of man's history

"What is that thought that has come into one's head as one turns round in the shadow of the roadside elm? A country-side worth fighting for if that were necessary, worth taking trouble to defend its peace. Hard by the hillside the country people of the day did verily fight for the peace and loveliness of this very country where I lie, and coming back from their victory scored the image of the White Horse as a token of their valour, and, who knows? perhaps as an example for their descendants to follow."

Then reflections pass through his mind, of the contrast between the days of Alfred the Great and the "shabby sordid story" of rural oppression and "9s slavery" of to-day, and of all its surrounding squalor of commercial villadom, when "Alfred's heraldry . . . yields to the lions on the half crown." Finally, he pictures the Socialist future, of "friends working for friends on land which [is] theirs", when "if a new Ashdown had to be fought (against capitalist robbers this time) the new White Horse would look down on the home of men as wise as the starlings, in their equality, and so perhaps as happy." Interweaving the beauty of nature and the struggle of man, past, present and future,

¹ First published in *Commonweal*, July 6th, 1889. Published as a pamphlet by James Leatham, the Aberdeen Socialist Leaguer, in 1891.

and employing the eye of the craftsman and the poet, the whole is a *tour de force*. And yet, so quiet and mellow is the tone, that the excellence of the artist's handiwork passes almost without notice. Certainly, in his respite from intense political activity, Morris was re-opening old veins of feeling.

Does this indicate that he had found propagandist activity and creative work incompatible? Or that he was beginning to lose interest in the Socialist Cause? Certainly the sheer volume of his work for the Cause in the past year or two had made it impossible for him to give concentrated attention to his creative work. But beyond this obvious fact, there seems to be no reason to accept the first suggestion, and many reasons to reject it, while the remainder of Morris's life contains more than sufficient testimony to refute the second.

The fact is, rather, this: the obvious failure of the League, and the change in Morris's perspectives which followed Bloody Sunday, led him to feel less urgency in the immediate details of the day-to-day struggle for Socialism—or, at least, less confidence that he himself had an urgent practical part to play. He had come to realize that he was (as Engels had called him several years before) "an untalented politician." The tide seemed to him to have set in the direction of Fabianism. In August, 1888, he wrote privately to "Georgie" Burne-Jones:

"I am prepared to see all organized Socialism run into the sand for a while. But we shall have done something even then, as we shall have forced intelligent people to consider the matter, and then there will come some favourable conjunction of circumstances in due time which will call for all our active work again. If I am alive then I shall chip in again, and one advantage I shall have, that I shall know much better what to do and what to forbear than this first time." ¹

Meanwhile, he felt his own contribution should be more one of theory than of action, to keep alive at least one centre of theoretical clarity, uncorrupted by any taint of opportunism, and to appeal over the heads of the present to the generation to come.

II "The League don't get on"

The larger background to Morris's change in perspective was in his growing realization of the resources of monopoly capitalism

¹ *Letters*, p. 294

and of imperialism During 1888 there was a good deal of discussion in Socialist circles, Fabian and Marxist alike, of the phenomenon of the growing trustification of American Big Business, and Morris made frequent reference to it in his *Commonweal* notes But it was the scramble for markets in Africa which claimed his closest attention Several years later Cecil Rhodes was to make the remark to W T Stead which served as a text in Lenin's *Imperialism*

"I was in the East End . yesterday and attended a meeting of the unemployed I listened to the wild speeches, which were just a cry for 'bread', 'bread', 'bread', and on my way home I pondered over the scene and I became more than ever convinced of the importance of imperialism The Empire is a bread and butter question If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists "

Already the most far-sighted English Socialists were taking notice of this trend On July 28th, 1888, Belfort Bax published in *Commonweal* a brief and excellent summary of the struggle for the partition of Africa England in the South, Germany in the Cameroons, Portugal on the East Coast, various powers in Zanzibar, England, France, and Italy in the North

"Few people probably realize what the opening up of Africa means It means this untold mineral, vegetable, and animal wealth placed at the disposal of the modern commercial system, a new world of markets, limitless cheap labour, practically boundless territories for emigration "

Bax's article was unusually lucid, factual and direct. His conclusions were tentative. Africa, he suggested, was now the *mainstay* of European capitalism, and he confessed the "dread possibility" of world capitalism "taking a new lease of life" from this new field of exploitation His last words were ominous

"It is quite conceivable that the present stage should be prolonged in a slightly changed form even for another century "

There is no doubt that Morris read these words carefully and pondered them many times Indeed, he took the unusual step of singling out the article for special comment in his "Notes" To Bax's pessimistic outlook he put forward a counter-suggestion "whether the accelerated pace which the impulse of huge new markets would certainly give to competitive commerce would not

go far to neutralize the advantages to capitalism of 'opening up' Africa" The "practical moral" which he put before the comrades was certainly not defeatist

"It is not our business merely to wait on circumstances, but to do our best to push forward the movement towards Socialism, which is at least as much part of the essence of the epoch as the necessities of capitalism are. Whatever is gained in convincing people that Socialism is right always, and inevitable at last will not be lost again, though it may be obscured for a time, even if a new period of prosperity sets in by leaps and bounds."

Nevertheless, the hullabaloo surrounding Stanley's pious exploits during 1889 kept the subject in the forefront of the *Commonweal* notes. Bax's article inclined Morris's mind still further to the view that the British working class would not enter the first serious stages of the struggle for Socialism during his lifetime, and that his task should be the sowing of seed which would bear fruit in future times of crisis.

Meanwhile, the continued disintegration of the League added to his depression. A series of letters written to Bruce Glasier in the second half of 1888 describe the process. Edinburgh, and the branches of the Scottish Land and Labour League founded the previous autumn by Mahon, were dismayed by the anti-parliamentary victory, and were supporting the formation of a Scottish Labour Party. "Don't be as factious as we are in London", Morris wrote on May 29th "If the S L L L insists on the parliamentary game, let it remain as it is and don't affiliate to it, but work with it cordially from outside." "I for one . . . should be only too glad to see the whole quarrel drop, on the grounds of letting each branch do as it pleases *as a branch*", he wrote again, on August 15th, after hearing that the S L L L was adamant on the parliamentary issue. The Annual Conference had recommended that the *Commonweal*, if still running at a serious deficit, should become once again a monthly, and Morris discussed the prospect

"True, it would be a defeat, but we must get used to such trifles as defeats, and refuse to be discouraged by them. Indeed, I am an old hand at that game, my life having been passed in being defeated, as surely every man's life must be who finds himself forced into a position of being a little ahead of the average in his aspirations."

The letter reported "something of a slack in the direct propaganda at present, but the big world is going on at a great rate towards the change, and I am sure that steady preaching of even a dozen men will make steady progress for the cause" ¹

Two weeks later the story was even less hopeful. Only the branches at Hammersmith and Glasgow seemed to be making headway. Elsewhere, in London, "the few who take an interest are pig-headed and quarrelsome"

"The East End agitation is a failure, the sale of *Commonweal* falls off which of course was inevitable after the business of the Conference a great deal of the excitement of our East End Leaguers was the result of 'indoor' agitation, i.e. quarrelling amongst ourselves, and the Parliamentarians having gone off the excitement has gone with them, and the excited friends withal. Now all this does not discourage me simply because I have discounted it, I have watched the men we are working with and know their weak points, and knew that this must happen. One or two of them are vainglorious humbugs, a good many are men who cannot argue, and have only impulsive feelings based on no sort of logic, emotional or otherwise, and fall back when there is nothing exciting going on. With all this the worst of them are no worse than other people, mostly they are better, and some very much better, so that supposing we broke up the band, any new band we got together would be composed of just the same elements. Therefore the only thing is to be patient and try to weld together those that are work-worthy"

On one point the letter expressed confidence. "We are quite determined here at Hammersmith to keep things going if no one else will" ²

The London and provincial branches kept the open-air stands going, and still held street sales of *Commonweal*. There was even an apparent accession of strength during the year—at Manchester a new recruit, Leonard Hall, pressed forward the propaganda, the Leicester Branch, led by Tom Barclay, showed renewed vigour, and the Nottingham and Sheffield Socialist Societies entered into closer fraternal alliance. But all the industrial "bite", the sharp presentation of class issues on the industrial front, which had once come from the pens of Binning and Mahon, was

¹ Glasier MSS. For the Scottish Labour Party, see H. M. Pelling, *op cit*, pp. 73 ff.

² Glasier, *op cit*, pp. 194-5.

absent from the pages of *Commonweal*. The paper was full of padding, and some of the articles were detached and academic, others vague with revolutionary romanticizing. Everywhere the tale was the same—the burden of propaganda carried on the shoulders of a dozen or half a dozen comrades, while within each branch Anarchist influence was growing. As early as November, 1887, Mowbray had complained from Norwich of the conduct of Fred Henderson, “who claims to be the ‘Leader’ of the Anarchist Group—it is uphill work for me to crush this con-founded ‘Upas Tree’ of no organization as preached by F H.”¹ Within a twelve-month the roles were reversed, Fred Henderson joining Mahon in his efforts to found a Labour Party, Mowbray a leader of the Anarchists on the League Council.¹ Even at Leeds Anarchist influence, led by Samuels, was becoming felt while at Leicester Tom Barclay (inclined towards Anarchist-Communism himself) was complaining that he and another comrade frequently conducted large open-air meetings in the City centre without the support of any members of the branch. At Hammersmith the Sunday lectures were popular enough but the weekly branch meeting was rarely attended by more than ten comrades, and the Sunday open-air stands at Hammersmith Bridge and Walham Green were manned by seven or eight “regulars”, including Morris himself. Throughout the remaining months of the year the return of *Commonweal* to a monthly seemed imminent. “I say 3 quires seems but a little to sell in the Commercial Capital of Scotland”, Morris scrawled across the top of a stiff financial letter to Glasier in September.² By the end of the year each branch of the League seemed to be going on its own independent way, and the character of its activity depended upon the energy and opinions of the moving spirits within it. No serious joint campaign or common purpose—Commune Celebrations and Chicago Commemorations apart—served to knit the League together from now until its final end. If it had not been for the

¹ C W Mowbray to Secretary, S L, November 10th, 1887, S L Correspondence, Int Inst Soc Hist

² Glasier MSS—another very stiff financial letter, beginning “People up here are getting impatient about your slackness in paying up.” For some reason, Glasier tacked on the protest about the small sale of *Commonweal* to a letter of another date (Glasier, *op cit*, p 191). Naturally, he did not publish any of the letters in which Morris admonished him for financial laxity.

Commonweal, and Morris's letters and occasional propaganda tours, the League would have had no real identity at all

No real identity, no discipline, no common conviction or direction—but none the less (or, perhaps, *because* of these things) it could be a happy hunting ground for factions and “indoor” agitators, exhibitionists and even police spies. On December 15th, 1888, Morris was writing wearily to Glasier

“ I am sorry to say that up here we have by no means got rid of our quarrels in getting rid of the Bloomsbury Branch—there seems to be a sort of curse of quarrelling upon us. The Anarchist element in us seem determined to drive things to extremity and break us up if we do not declare for Anarchy—which I for one will not do. Hammersmith remains satisfactory—but is getting into bad odour with some of our fiercer friends, I think principally because it tacitly and instinctively tries to keep up the first idea of the League, the making of genuine convinced Socialists without reference to passing exigences of tactics. I find that living in this element is getting work rather too heavy for me. It is lamentable that Socialists will make things hard for their comrades ”

“After all”, he concluded, “all this is but one corner of the movement, which really taken as a whole and looked at from some way off is going on swimmingly .”¹ But he found little real comfort in this reflection. The possible curtailment or end of the *Commonweal* discouraged him as much as any falling off in the League, since he had always prided himself that it was one of the foremost Socialist papers in the world. “There is no doubt that the death of the *Weal* would be a great discouragement to the party both at home and abroad”, he wrote to Glasier on January 21st, 1889

“The truth must be faced, the ‘Communists of the League’ are in a very weak position in the Socialist party at present. We have been much damaged both by parliamentaries & Anarchists, & I don’t think we are strong enough to run a paper, although, numbers apart, there is something to be said for us”²

By the spring of 1889 he had abandoned all hope for the League, and held on only for the sake of old loyalties and friendships, and for the sake of keeping *Commonweal* in being. Of his immediate circle of friends, Charlie Faulkner, of the old Oxford

¹ *Letters*, p. 304.

² Glasier MSS and Glasier, *op cit*, p. 198

"Brotherhood", had been struck down by a lingering mól of illness, which cast yet another shadow upon Morris's mind. Emery Walker, the Secretary of the Hammersmith Branch, was busy with the new Arts and Crafts Society, and had less time to spend upon the League. Philip Webb was still at his side, but more through loyalty than through conviction. Joseph Lane had been incapacitated by illness, and in 1889 withdrew from the League altogether after some final difference of opinion. Frank Kitz, now Secretary of the League, was active enough, but his natural impulsive "leftism" had put him into the hands of the Anarchist section. For some time Andreas Scheu (although an occasional contributor to *Commonweal*) had withdrawn from prominent activity. He was travelling for Jaeger, and "had begun to express disappointment" in the workers. Robert Banner had never been prominent in League affairs, and had confined his work to Woolwich. Belfort Bax had rejoined the S D F, although remaining on terms of friendship with Morris. J. L. Joynes had long been ill and in retirement, and Morris kept in touch with him only by occasional correspondence. Edward Carpenter still assisted the Sheffield Socialist Society (and was to attend the International Congress in the summer) but his preoccupations were moving away from the political field. Old E. T. Craig was confined to bed. The Avelings, Binning and old Fred Lessner, the veteran of 1848, had gone with the Bloomsbury branch, although Lessner at least remained in touch with Morris at Hammersmith. Of the others who were prominent with him in the pioneering days, or who had signed the original Manifesto of the League, only Mainwaring, Mowbray and Tom Maguire of Leeds remained.

"As to the movement", Morris wrote to Glasier on March 19th, 1889,

"between you and me the League don't get on—except like a cow's tail, downwards. Up here there is a great deal of quarrelling (in which I take no part), the basis of which is that some of them want the paper made 'more revolutionary', i e., they want to write the articles themselves (which they can't do), and to do a little blood and thunder without any meaning, which might get *me* into trouble but couldn't hurt them. I am now paying for the League (including paper) at the rate of £500 a year, and I cannot stand it, at Whitsuntide I must withdraw half of that, whatever may happen which will probably be the end of *Commonweal* followed by the practical end of the League. A little

while ago this would have seemed very terrible, but it does not trouble me much now. Socialism is spreading, I suppose on the only lines on which it could spread, and the League is moribund simply because we are outside those lines, as I for one must always be. But I shall be able to do just as much work in the movement when the League is gone as I do now. Meantime, it is a matter of course that I shall do what I can to put off the evil day for *Commonweal*.¹

Morris was speaking no more than the truth. The puzzle is, not that he left the League at the end of 1890, but that he did not leave it eighteen months before. Almost the entire financial burden was now upon his shoulders, and after £1,000 damages had been mulcted from him in a libel action early in 1888, he had been forced to limit his propaganda visits to the provinces, and to cover the expenses of his Scottish visit by a professional engagement. "This perhaps seems to you unpoetic", he wrote to Glasier.

"I think you once before reproached me with this failing, so I will remind you that I have a remarkably good appetite and that I shall probably have another thirty years (unless the Lord cuts me short) and that I can't reasonably expect to be kept at her Majesty's expense for above two or three of those years."²

Now, with the constant disapproval of his wife, and his long neglect of the Firm, this drain on his pocket could not be allowed to continue. At Whitsun, 1889, he made his first cut by bringing his "salary guarantee" to an end.³

Even more true was his judgement that the League (apart from the *Commonweal*) was becoming a restraint upon his work for the

¹ Glasier, *op cit*, p. 201. I presume the letter to have been written in 1889 and not 1890 (as dated by Glasier).

² Glasier MSS, January 28th, 1888.

³ *Weekly Letter to Secretaries of Socialist League Branches*, June 20th, 1889. Morris informed Glasier in a letter of March 19th, 1889 (Glasier, *op cit*, p. 201) that he was then paying for the League and *Commonweal* "at the rate of £500 a year". From various papers, treasurer's statements, etc., preserved with the Hammersmith Minutes, I calculate that in 1889 Morris was paying on the average £1 4s a week rent of League office, £1 a week salary guarantee (withdrawn at Whitsun) and £4 a week to meet the *Commonweal* deficit (average expenditure £9 10s, average receipts £5 10s). In addition, there were regular "exceptional" subsidies to make up salaries, special leaflets, publications, Hammersmith activities, etc. The League income came largely from literature sales, collections, and donations, and the branch monthly contributions were by now pitiful. On October 8th, 1890, they dropped to the sum of 1s 8d for the week.

Cause. If Donald had irritated and angered him by his methods of intrigue, the leading spirits among the Anarchists seemed to provoke him to contempt "Outside the Hammersmith Branch", he wrote in April, 1889,

"the *active* (?) members in London mostly consider themselves Anarchists, but don't know anything about Socialism and go about ranting revolution in the streets, which is about as likely to happen in our time as the conversion of Englishmen from stupidity to quickwittedness"¹

Donald and Mahon were making troublesome flanking attacks, drawing away a few good supporters (see p. 652). Finally, in June the Annual Conference was once again upon him, and he wrote in irritation to Glasier, asking for a Glasgow delegate

"It may be of importance to send a good man, since I believe there will be an attempt to get on to the Council a majority of stupid hobbdehays who call themselves anarchists and *are* fools, and to oust Kitz from the Secretaryship as he forsooth is not advanced enough for them. If this were to succeed it would break up the League. I and, I think, most of the others who were worth anything would walk out."²

As it turned out, the Fifth Annual Conference was a meek and mild affair compared with the previous two "Harmony permeated the meeting", declared an official report "At no previous Conference were Liberty, Fraternity and Equality so practically set forth."³ Only twelve branches sent delegates, as opposed to twenty-one the year before. * Kitz retained the Secretaryship, and Morris the Editorship of *Commonweal*, with the addition of Nicoll as an Assistant Editor. The Anarchist section on the Council were strengthened by the election of H. Davis, Samuels, and John Turner. For the first time the names of Mainwaring, and Lane did not appear on the Council. Morris's own group was reduced to himself, Philip Webb, Sparling (an unreliable ally), and Sam Bullock and H. B. Tarleton of the Hammersmith Branch. This was a sad decline in quality from the Provisional Council of 1885.

To all serious intents, the old Socialist League was at an end.

¹ Glasier, *op cit*, p. 202

² Glasier MSS, June 5th, 1889

³ *Commonweal*, June 15th, 1889

⁴ London branches: Hammersmith, Clerkenwell, St. George's-in-the-East, North London, East London Provincial. Glasgow, Edinburgh, Norwich, Leicester, Yarmouth, Oxford, Manchester

III *The New Unionism*

The S D F., as well as the League, was encountering difficulties in 1888 and 1889. The "Tory Gold" incident had blown over, it is true, and the S D F. had made some progress, especially in South Lancashire, where Tom Mann had come as organizer after leaving Newcastle in the Spring of 1888. MORRIS made a Lecture tour of the district in December, 1888—visiting Manchester, Liverpool, Bolton, Blackburn, Rochdale, and also Charles Rowley's Sunday Society at Ancoats.¹ In Manchester he stayed with his friend, J. Hunter Watts, and was impressed by the quality and enthusiasm of the S D F. rank and file. But elsewhere (London, perhaps, excepted) the S D F. was by no means as firmly established as Hyndman liked to claim. Many of its branches passed through the same vicissitudes as did those of the League. According to charges made by Edouard Bernstein in June, 1889, the circulation of *Justice* had shrunk in the previous months from over 4,000 to "barely 1/3rd of that number." "There are branches which never go through the formality of a meeting, and large industrial towns where never a copy of the paper is read."² If these charges were true, the sales of *Justice* had fallen below those of *Commonweal*—for Frank Kitz, the League's Secretary, was still "sending out" over 2,000 copies in June, 1889. Hyndman's dictatorship (in his own words, "my contempt for uneducated and undisciplined democracy")³ was alienating his best members, and his sectarianism, just as much as Morris's purism, was hampering Socialist participation in the Eight-hour agitation and the New Unionism. In June, 1888, Tom Mann was writing to John Burns: "Nationally I have lost hope as regards S D F., tho' I am sanguine concerning one or two districts."⁴ There was no more harmony on its Executive than on

¹ An account of the tour was given by Morris in an article, "In and About Cottonopolis", *Commonweal*, December 15th, 1888.

² E. Bernstein, *The International Working Men's Congress of 1889: a Reply to the 'Manifesto of the S D F.'* (1889).

³ Hyndman, *Further Reminiscences* (1912), p. 144.

⁴ Six months earlier (December 31st, 1887) Tom Mann had written to Burns: "I'm glad to know so many London comrades are in favour of Amalgamation", and was suggesting Annie Besant as Editor of a general Socialist newspaper (Brit. Mus. Add. MSS. 46286).

the League's Council John Burns was feeling "very depressed about the immediate future of the movement Am convinced that we have dissipated nearly all our energy in the wrong direction and upon the wrong man"¹ "The S D F as a national body representative of the workers", he noted in his diary in August, 1888, "must be remodelled not to say merged in other bodies ere it does practical work"

Nothing seemed to be able to break down the jealousies and differences in London Outside London and Glasgow, the members of League, S D F and independent Socialist Clubs, might work together amicably enough But every attempt to build up formal unity broke down, or brought to birth yet one more faction Champion, who had left the S.D F, had incurred the high displeasure of Hyndman for sounding out the possibilities of amalgamation, which could only be accomplished by detaching Hyndman's following from him He and Mahon had worked together in the Scottish Land and Labour League propaganda at the end of 1887 and, after playing a prominent part in promoting Keir Hardie's fight at Mid-Lanark early in 1888, they had assisted in forming the Scottish Labour Party Together with Tom Mann and John Burns, Champion launched, in the same year, *The Labour Elector*, which voiced the new militancy in the Unions, and exposed "black" employers and the shadow-boxing of the "Lib -Lab" M.Ps² J L Mahon, also, was now acting as a free-lance, having brought most of the Scottish Land and Labour League into the Scottish Labour Party Late in 1888 he wrote *A Labour Programme*, which contained a clear blue-print for the I L.P. Mahon's debt to Engels can be seen on every page of this pamphlet—in the broad, unsectarian approach, the understanding of the labour movement, and of the educative role of political and industrial action. On the other hand, Mahon, in his flight from doctrinaire theory, was beginning to slide down the opposite slope of belief in "spontaneity" throughout the pamphlet there runs a half-spoken contempt for theory, and an acid and unfraternal treatment of his old comrades, whom he believed to be over-academic and doctrinaire³ The workers, wrote Mahon, "want

¹ Diary of John Burns for 1888, Brit Mus Add MSS 46310

² For Champion's activities in this period, see H M Pelling, *op cit*, pp 59 f

³ *A Labour Programme*, by J L Mahon (Labour Platform Series, No 1,

their everyday lives made easier, and in the meantime the mass of them will only do what will lead to that in some tangible way” If Joseph Lane wished to make the sole slogan of the movement “Educate”, Mahon would seem to have preferred only “Organize!” The workers were not to be won *for* Socialism, but directed *into* it by skilled Socialist organizers like Mahon. In several passages Mahon seemed to envisage the people, not as the agents of social change, but as the dull motive power urged onwards by economic pressures. “Active, struggling human beings”, he admitted in an afterthought, “are amongst the great instruments of progress, and much depends upon their intelligence and readiness of movement”¹ To Marx (and to Morris) active, struggling human beings were the *only* agents of change. Mahon had had a bellyful of the purist Socialism of the Glasgow Leaguers and of Farringdon Road, and in his desire to give expression to the changing mood of the people, he was looking for a short-cut to Socialism which ignored the necessity of educating the people in Socialist theory alongside the practical day-to-day struggle.

In conformity with his *Labour Programme* he promoted early in 1889 the “Labour Union”, whose objects were

“The Emancipation of Labour from the control of the monopolists, and the realization of a State based on co-operative principles, in which the workers will have the wealth they create and idlers will have no place

“To aid present movements for improving the social condition of the people”

To these objects—far vaguer than those of the North of England Socialist Federation of 1887—was added a whole string of immediate reforms, taken from current Radical programmes.²

1888), p. 77 “Political education does not consist of mere talking. There is nowadays a small school of doctrinaire academic politicians who think they are advancing the political education of the people merely by trying to spread a knowledge of formulas and theories.” See also the jibes at the “non-political Socialists”, p. 63

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64

² “Platform of the Labour Union” (handbill, 1888). Immediate political demands included Home Rule for Ireland, Adult Suffrage, Triennial Parliaments, Payment of Members, Abolition of the House of Lords, the Reform of Local Government, the Eight-hour Day, Free Education, Nationalization (or “State Acquisition”) of Land, Mines, Railways, Docks, Banks and Liquor

The means of attaining these ends were stated to lie in the formation of an independent political Labour Party, to which end divisions of the Labour Union were to be promoted throughout the country. The organizing committee contained many old Leaguers, with Mahon and H. A. Barker (both ex-Secretaries of the League) as Joint Secretaries; Binning as Treasurer, and Donald, Robert Banner and two less prominent old Leaguers on the Committee. Provincial representatives included several prominent Leaguers (several of whom still maintained their League membership), among them G. A. Gaskell (Bingley), Tom Maguire (Leeds), Tom Muse (Carlisle) and Fred Pickles (Bradford). Other notable associates (or at least signatories) included Cunninghame Graham, Keir Hardie, Morrison Davidson (the prominent Radical journalist), C. L. Fitzgerald (of the now-defunct Socialist Union) and J. Shaw Maxwell (later the first Secretary of the I. L. P.)

It is doubtful whether the "Labour Union" was ever much more than a paper organization, and certainly Mahon's influence was of much less importance than that of Champion and Tom Mann. Keir Hardie was too far away to take much interest in the "Labour Union" and the absence of the names of Champion, Mann or Burns from its Committee suggests that it was outside the main current of the New Unionism. In immediate practical terms its chief impact must have been as nuisance value to Morris and the League. "A great deal of our trouble comes from Messrs. Donald and Mahon", Morris wrote to Glasier in April, 1889, "who have been rather clever at pulling us to pieces, but could do nothing towards building up even their own humbugging self-seeking party".¹ The "Labour Union" came to its end in the disaster of the postmen's strike in the summer of 1890 (see p. 652) but before this occurred, at least two more prominent and active Leaguers—W. A. Chambers and Fred Henderson, had joined its ranks.

Traffic, Disestablishment of Church of England, Abolition of the Standing Army, Free Administration of Justice, Productive Labour for Unemployed, Artisans' Dwellings, Abolition of Indirect Taxation, etc. A later version (August, 1889) included Home Rule for Scotland and Wales. At this date A. K. Donald had replaced Mahon as Joint Secretary with H. A. Barker.

¹ Glasier, *op cit*, p. 202. I presume this letter to be wrongly dated by Glasier.

Six years of active propaganda, hundreds of converts, many thousands of people influenced—and yet the political Socialist movement was split into a hundred fragments the Socialist Union and North of England Socialist Federation dead, the League and the S D F declining in membership, here a “Labour Union” and there an independent Socialist Club, in Hull a “Freiheit Group” and in Battersea a Labour League, in Bristol a Socialist splinter group brooding over *Munera Pulveris* and the ethics of the new life; in Chelsea a Social Democratic Club, issuing red leaflets headlined, “TO HELL WITH TRADE-UNIONISM”¹ What has happened to all the years of enthusiasm and sacrifice? To the winter mornings when John Burns and his wife went month after month at three and four o’clock to the dock gates? To the eager faces of the Northumberland miners at their Easter rally? To the months spent by Mahon tramping the Scottish coal-fields? To the massed crowds watching Linnell’s funeral after “Bloody Sunday”? To that discussion in the Borough of Hackney Club, where England’s greatest living intellectual laid bare the causes of exploitation and poverty while the pie-boy and the pot-boy went their rounds? To the thousands of *Justices* and *Commonweals*, the thousands of open-air meetings on street corners and village greens, held by the pioneers?

“No movement absorbs so much fruitless labour as one which has not yet emerged from the status of a sect”, Engels had written to Sorge in June, 1887. But now at last these labours were beginning to bear fruit, and the movement of ideas (which cut off from action was beginning to assume so many exotic hothouse shapes) was to be transformed into a movement of men. The Eight Hours’ Campaign, which Tom Mann had been championing within the Socialist movement since 1886, the strike of the Bryant and May’s match-girls, and the strikes of tram-men and seamen, were heralding those great events of 1889 and 1890, which, willy-nilly, forced the most active and resolute Socialists in the direction of unity. In March, 1889, the Gas-workers’ and General Labourers’ Union had been formed by the

¹ The handbill continues “It is manifest that it is a matter of urgency that trade unionism be at once and without reverence deposited in Gehenna. When it has been got rid of, the workers will join a union wide enough to include them all, and that has for its aim the Social Revolution. They will RALLY ROUND THE RED FLAG ”, etc., etc.

Socialist Will Thorne, with the help of Eleanor Aveling, John Burns and Tom Mann. By the summer it had attracted widespread attention, and won its first victories without even a strike. The "unorganizable" unskilled workers were stirring everywhere. It was a time when one Socialist, active and determined, giving assistance to the unskilled workers, was worth twenty discussing revolutionary tactics in their private clubrooms.

At Leeds the Socialist Leaguers took note "We are endeavouring to organize the unskilled labourers in all branches of industry in the town", they reported laconically in *Commonweal* on July 6th, 1889, "since the aristocrats of labour take no steps in organizing them." Thereafter they went "off the air", sometimes for weeks at a time. It was a dramatic story, which might have been repeated in every town in the country (as it was in several) if only the Socialists had come through the previous six years with a united party, however small. Since 1884, when Tom Maguire, still in his teens, had joined the Democratic Federation, and had started to preach the word at "the popular spouting place", Vicar's Croft, the small League branch had kept up an unceasing propaganda. The Leaguers had opened their own clubroom, sold *Commonweal*, gone on propaganda outings, held joint activities with the branches at Bingley and Bradford. William Morris had paid them a successful visit, Edward Carpenter was often with them, when Annie Besant had visited them, their clubroom was smashed up by an angry mob inspired by the Catholic priests. Maguire never spared himself. He earned a pittance as a photographer, and was often without work. His *Machine-Room Chants* and occasional verse in Socialist papers stand out from other Socialist versifying at the time by reason of their greater range and realism. The Socialist League had poets enough in its ranks. But the poetry of the most frequent contributors to *Commonweal* was often pallid and overstrained, speaking in high-flown conventional revolutionary imagery drawn from romantic pictures of the Commune, dealing in tyrants and blood, barricades and red flags. Maguire wrote directly from his own experience. he was a forerunner in poetry of Tressall, he did not romanticize the working people, but described them with all their weaknesses, without condescension and with an underlying faith in their power. In his versatility, his cultural achievements, his enthusiasm

and self-sacrifice, he typified all that was best in the Socialist League. And, he was perhaps, the most able working-class agitator the League produced.

In 1889 he was only twenty-four, but six years of agitation had brought him to early maturity. Although the Leeds branch of the League still stood at a membership of about thirty, Maguire and Tom Paylor, Fred Corkwell, W. Hill and Alf Mattison were now well known among the workers of Leeds—crazy, crack-brained Socialists, perhaps, but there was no doubting their sincerity—and there was truth in what they said. In the early summer of 1889 they began to draw bigger and bigger crowds to Vicar's Croft—600, 800, even 1,000. Then, at the beginning of July, some builders' labourers who were at the meeting, began to discuss their grievances. Like the London dockers, they were paid at the rate of 5d. an hour. "Comrades Sweeney and Paylor . . . took the matter up and urged the men to form a Union." The next Sunday, July 30th, 3,000 labourers came to the spouting-place. Maguire, Paylor, Hill and Sweeney addressed them. 200 names were handed in, in the afternoon the Socialist League clubroom was crowded out, a provisional committee was elected, it decided at once to strike for $\frac{1}{2}$ d. an hour, a general meeting was held, and the proposal was agreed to unanimously.

This was six weeks before the great dockers' strike set the movement of the unskilled aflame throughout the country. The builders' labourers used the League clubroom as their campaign centre. Maguire and Paylor gave constant advice and leadership. The Leaguers organized collections, and meetings. 3,000 and 4,000 strong became frequent on Vicar's Croft. The small master-builders capitulated first; later the big contractors were forced to their knees. "The resolute attitude of the men from the first", wrote Maguire,

"the comparative absence of 'scabs', and the successful conducting of the struggle have won the admiration of skilled workmen, whose unions . . . have never carried through so unanimous and uncompromising a strike."¹

"Throughout this struggle", Alf Mattison recalled, "Maguire worked like a Trojan, and for a long time afterwards remained

¹ "Notes on the Leeds Labourers Strike", *Commonweal*, August 10th, 1889

the adviser and general helper of the Union."¹ On the eve of the Dock Strike complete victory was celebrated. A strong and permanent Union of the "new" type had been formed

After this there was no respite. The Leeds Socialists had been transformed in a month from being a curious sect into being the advisers and leaders of the unskilled workers of Leeds. The great Dock Strike, under the leadership of John Burns, Tom Mann and Ben Tillett, repeated the same thing on a vast scale for the "submerged" population of the East End. Tens of thousands of men struck under Socialist leadership, and nearly 100,000 marched repeatedly in disciplined order through the heart of London. The "criminal classes" of bourgeois fiction and of *The Times'* leading articles proved themselves, not the *sans-culottes*, rioters and assassins of the poems of David Nicoll and the Anarchist wing of the League, but "working-men". The men who had fought at the dock gates for work, slept ten in a room in the rotting tenements, dropped exhausted from an hour or two of labouring—these men regained their manhood. "The coals we blew upon were working men", wrote John Burns,

"oppressed, beaten down, but working-men still, who had it in them to struggle and to fight for their daily bread. I have been in the thick of starving men, with hundreds of pounds about me (they knowing it), and not a penny have I lost. I have sent men whom I did not know, for change of a gold piece, and have never been cheated of a penny. Not a man through all the weeks of that desperate Strike ever asked me for drink money."²

The dockers, wrote Morris after they had won,

"have shown qualities of unselfishness and power of combination which we may well hope will appear again before long. They have knocked on the head the old slander against the lower ranks of labour, and shown that these men can organize themselves at least as well, and be at least as true to their class, as the aristocracy of labour. No result of the strike is more important than the effect it will have as a blow against class jealousy amongst the workers themselves."³

Their example had set the whole East End on the move, and all the "sweated" trades were seething with discontent.

Meanwhile, official League and official S D F alike looked on

¹ *Tom Maguire a Remembrance*, p. xiv

² *The New Review*, October, 1889

³ *Commonweal*, September 21st, 1889

with a certain lofty detachment, mixed with expressions of sympathy, and also a certain element of suspicion aroused by the widespread middle-class support for the strikers. Every worthwhile branch of the League, including Hammersmith, held meetings and made collections in the dockers' support, and the most active London agitators, chiefly of the Anarchist wing (for Nicoll had now been for some time Secretary of the Propaganda Committee), went down to the dock gates to distribute "tons" of literature and make revolutionary speeches. But their support was from outside, rather than from within. The concept of *building* the workers' organizations, leading and organizing their struggles, as John Burns, Tom Mann, Eleanor Aveling and Tom Maguire were doing, was strange to them. In October, 1889, the League's Council issued a statement which was surely the most pitiful in all its years of existence.

"In answer to numerous enquiries, the Executive Council desires to express its opinion that members of the League do not in any way compromise their principles by taking part in strikes, but asks them not to let the revolutionary propaganda suffer thereby"¹

Maguire must have said, Thank you, kind gentlemen, for that fighting lead!

How did William Morris react to these great movements, which Engels was hailing as the re-birth of the English working class? When the builders' labourers' strike was afoot at Leeds, Morris was attending the International Congress in Paris (see p. 625 f.). On his return, he went down to Kelmscott, where he remained for the first fortnight of the dock strike. From there he sent down his usual "Notes" to *Commonweal*, which sadly underestimated the great event, expressing the need for a "general combination" of the workers (as if this could come about, of itself, without such events as were at that very time in progress) and of the necessary failure of strikes which did not, for exceptional reasons, have the backing of public opinion.² Returning to London at the end of August he found the Leaguers "in a great state of excitement about the strike, the importance of which I had not at all understood in the country. I thought that perhaps our folk a little exaggerated the importance of it, as to

¹ *Commonweal*, October 12th, 1889

² *Ibid*, August 24th, 1889

some of them it seemed that now at last, the revolution was beginning. Whereas indeed it began before the Mammoth ended, and is now only going on"¹ Hopes of speedy revolution apart, he now recognized the importance of the strike "However it ends, it will have been by far the most important one of our times. . ."² Next week the whole of his *Commonweal* notes were devoted to the strike, under the title, "The Lesson of the Hour" His attitude was far more positive ("This is a revolt against oppression . . . this is a strike of the poor against the rich"), although still carrying a savour of the old detachment, i e. the concept that the strike was something *apart* from the Socialist movement He returned to the theme the next week, and gave a necessary warning to those Socialists who had been deluded into mistaking the degree and nature of middle-class support for the strikers

"These strikes are not less dangerous to the supremacy of the landlords and their abettors than the Trafalgar Square incidents, but more dangerous There is only one reason why Burns is not going to Pentonville this time, and why the streets are not cleared by the bludgeon, and if necessary by the bayonet, and that is because the rulers of this happy land are afraid to do it The men are too many and too desperate, and their miserable condition has really impressed itself on a large part of the non-political middle classes, and above all, their brother-workers are really in active sympathy with the strikers"³

At last he understood that the strike (together with the revolt within the older trade unions, voiced once again in the attacks on Broadhurst at the Trades Union Congress) was leading in the direction of the general combination of labour the League had advocated for so long—towards a "far wider and more generous association of the workers inspired with Socialistic feeling" On the victory of the strikers, he summed up the issues of the struggle in a way which suggested that he was moving rapidly away from his early purist attitude to the trades unions

"Although mere combination amongst the men, with no satisfactory ulterior aim, is not itself Socialism, yet it is both a necessary education for the workers, and it is an instrument which Socialism cannot dispense with"

Still, however, he underestimated the importance of the issues

¹ *Letters*, p 317. ² *Ibid*, p 316 ³ *Commonweal*, September 14th, 1889

around which the new unions must be built the "dockers' tanner" aroused his indignation as a "precarious mere-subsistence wage for the hardest of hard work" He still gave the impression of brushing aside the justice of the workers' immediate demands, and of looking forward impatiently to the time when the dockers should have learnt the irreconcilable opposition of capitalists and workers, and should be compelled to use their new organization for—

"its one real use, the realization of Socialism, to which undoubtedly this strike has been a step, as part of the labour struggle, as part of the attack on our enemy—Capitalism"¹

Meanwhile Tom Maguire and his comrades in Leeds, the Leaguers in Bradford, Sheffield, Manchester and one or two other provincial centres—these men were plunged up to the neck in the work of organizing section after section of the unskilled Had Morris been surrounded by comrades of that quality in London, he might have taken up an even more positive attitude But the active Leaguers in London were now a poor bunch it is difficult to find, in 1889, more than a handful of active trade unionists among them The reaction of some of the Anarchist section to the Dock Strike was altogether different from that of Morris It indicated to them that the workers were on the eve of a rising, that *Commonweal* should speak more often and more plainly of the barricades, even that the time was near when dynamite should be put in the people's hands Except in Hammersmith, Morris withdrew more and more from the active propaganda in despair And when the first great May Day of 1890 took place, he was once again to "miss the bus".

IV *The Second International—and the Fabians*

It was in 1889 that William Morris began consistently to define his political position among the contending Socialist factions by the term which he maintained to the end of his life, "Communist". What did he mean by the word?

He did *not* mean—as has sometimes been suggested—that he held some kind of Utopian position, derived from Owen or St Simon He meant, in the first place, to identify himself with the

¹ *Commonweal*, September 21st, 1889

recognized Communist tradition the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, the Communists of the Paris Commune, the revolutionary theory of Marx and Engels.¹ In the second place, he meant to dissociate himself emphatically from several sections of the English movement from the Fabians, from the Anarchists inside and outside the League, and from the "Social-Democracy" of Hyndman, which—while making use of the name and some of the teachings of Marx he suspected of both opportunism and reformism. In the third place, he wished it to denote acceptance of the revolutionary road of struggle as opposed to the road of gradual "evolution" (and, until 1892, he insisted that this must include acceptance of the "anti-parliamentary" position), and, further, to denote acceptance of certain points of principle in the organization of the society of the future. Three controversies served to crystallize his views during 1889—the calling of the International Congress in Paris, the struggle with Fabianism, and the contest with the Anarchists within the League.

At the same time as Hyndman was writing in *To-day* of Marx as "the Aristotle of the Nineteenth Century" he was bitterly opposing the calling of the International Socialist Working-Men's Congress which was being promoted by leading European Marxists—among them Bebel, Liebknecht, Bernstein and Lafargue—and which had Engels's full support. The French Possibilists (engaged in similar parliamentary manoeuvring to that which Hyndman denounced mercilessly in Broadhurst and Burt) were convening a rival Congress, on terms which would have excluded the French Marxists (and, possibly, other European Socialist Parties) from attending. By contrast the "Marxist" Congress (which was to be the foundation Congress of the Second International) was declared open to all Socialist and working-class representatives.

Hyndman associated himself with the Possibilist Congress, partly from personal pique, in revenge at the Avelings' part in the

¹ E.g. see *Commonweal*, June 18th, 1887, where Morris, in a review of Kempner's *Common-sense Socialism*, remarks approvingly "It is worth while to note apropos of the attempt some persons make to draw a hard and fast line between Socialism and Communism, that Mr Kempner uses the latter word in the sense that it is used in the 'Manifesto' of Marx and Engels of 1847. A Communist is with him one who advocates the communisation or nationalisation of the raw material and instruments of labour and distribution."

split in the S D F , and from opposition to Engels, the "Grand Lama of Regent's Park Road" ¹ It was a sorry business, since if the S D F had taken a different attitude, a magnificent united delegation might have attended the Paris Congress from Britain Morris associated himself with the "Marxist" Congress from the start, and other signatories from Britain included Cunninghame Graham, Keir Hardie (for the Ayrshire Miners' Union), and Tom Mann and H H Champion (for the newly-formed Labour Electoral Association) Alongside Hyndman was Annie Besant, now active in the Fabian Society, and making public attacks both on Marxist theory and the Socialist League

Frank Kitz and William Morris were delegated to the Congress from the Council of the League, while several of the branches sent their own delegates Delegates were assembled from nearly every European nation, and from America their "earnestness and enthusiasm", wrote Morris, "was very impressive". The formal proceedings of the Congress provoked his impatience Differences of opinion were aggravated by bad organization, and various trifling matters—the Parisian delegates chatted together when the French speeches were concluded, so that Eleanor Marx-Aveling and the other translators could not make their voices heard two days were spent in discussing possible fusion with the Possibilist Congress, so that insufficient time was left for the discussion of resolutions delegate after delegate exceeded his permitted time A number of anti-parliamentary resolutions (including one from Frank Kitz) were left undiscussed On the final day, when Morris (with Kitz and Tarleton) was visiting his favourite cathedral, Rouen, a well-known Italian Anarchist from London, Dr Merlino, created a disturbance He had put down a long-winded Anarchist resolution which was not discussed, and when protesting, he was ruled out of order by the Chairman and forcibly expelled, to the accompaniment of the withdrawal of the remaining delegates of the League Morris, returning from Rouen, was informed of the incident, and registered a formal protest on behalf of his comrades In loyalty to his own delegates, he had no alternative But, as far as this incident went, the clamour raised by the Anarchists about "suppression of opinion" was mostly ballyhoo Dr Merlino was out to provoke an incident of exactly this

¹ *Justice*, April 1st, 1893

kind, he represented no important organization, and, since he had popped up a day or two before at the Possibilist Congress with the same resolution, he could hardly lay much claim on the delegates' time.

That was the negative side of the Congress. Thereafter, Kitz, Merlino & Co fanned the flames of dissension for as long as they could—a controversy in which Morris refused to take part. The overall effect of the Congress Morris felt to be positive—"a successful demonstration at the least." He himself had presented the report from England while (on his insistence) Keir Hardie had presented a second report from the "parliamentary side."¹ The selection by the international committee (among whom the German Marxists greatly predominated) of Morris as the English spokesman, together with the enthusiastic reception he received from the delegates, was a clear indication of the great standing which his name held at this time in the European and American Socialist movement. Edward Carpenter has left a description of Morris speaking from the rostrum

"After the glib oratorical periods of Jules Guesde and others, what a contrast to see Morris fighting furiously there on the platform with his own words (he was not feeling well that day), hacking and hewing the stubborn English phrases out—his tangled grey mane tossing, his features reddening with the effort! But the effect was remarkable. Something in the solid English way of looking at things made that speech one of the most effective in the session."²

Since the main point on the agenda concerned labour legislation and the international fight for the Eight-hour Day (the value of which Morris—still holding to his belief in the Iron Law of Wages—doubted),³ Morris's contribution was outside the main current of the debate. It was in the social events and informal meetings that he felt the spirit of fraternity and internationalism found its best expression, and, on his return, summed up his general impression

¹ Morris's contribution is given in full in the *Protocol* of the Congress, published in Paris (1889) and in a German translation by Liebknecht (Nuremberg, 1890)

² *Freedom*, December, 1896

³ Morris quoted with approval the gibe of one Anarchist historian "Apropos of palliation by legislation on labour, he said 'When I was a Collectivist I was taught the Iron Law so well by Marx and Liebknecht, that I cannot forget it now I am an Anarchist'" (*Commonweal*, August 3rd, 1889)

“Such gatherings are not favourable for the dispatch of business, and their real use is as *demonstrations*, and it would be better to organize them as such. Two or three great public meetings should be held. Opportunities should be given for the delegates to meet each other in social and conversational meetings, and there should be no voting, no ‘playing at Parliament’ This is my wisdom after the event”¹

If the Paris Congress had found Morris (apart from his anti-parliamentary views) standing alongside the European Marxist parties, in contrast to Hyndman who had been carried by vanity and chauvinism into the opponents’ camp, he was at the same time dissociating himself without compromise from the Fabian and Anarchist positions. His disagreements with the Fabians dated back for several years. But, at that time, the issues had been befuddled by the “parliamentary” question, and the character of Fabianism, already implicit in the social make-up and outlook of the Society, had not yet emerged as explicit theory. Although several of the Fabian lecturers were content to confine themselves to valuable research, and to drawing-room propaganda, Shaw—whom Morris declared to be “one of the clearest heads and best pens that Socialism has got”²—was as ready to go on to the street-corners or into the Radical Clubs as was Morris himself.

It was after Bloody Sunday that Fabianism began to emerge as an important influence within the Socialist movement. “We are all Socialists now”, Sir William Harcourt had declared, and John Morley, in his *Life of Cobden*, had pointed to state interference in industry and municipal government as examples of “Socialistic” legislation. “I am a Socialist because I am a believer in Evolution”, Annie Besant had written in 1886.

“The State has interfered with factories and workshops, to fix the hours of labour, to insist on sanitary arrangements, to control the employment of the young. Land Acts and Ground Game Acts, Education Acts and Shipping Acts, Employers’ Liability Acts and Artisans’ Dwellings Acts, crowd our Statute book. Everywhere the old ideas of free contract, of non-interference, are being outraged by modern legislation”³

¹ See Morris, “Impressions of the Paris Congress”, *Commonweal*, July 27th, and August 3rd, 1889, F. Kitz, August 10th, 1889, and correspondence in ensuing issues.

² *Commonweal*, January 25th, 1890.

³ Annie Besant, *Why I Am a Socialist* (n.d.)

A few more and bigger Acts, the implication was, and Socialism would have evolved—without struggle, revolution, or serious inconvenience. The enemy was no longer the capitalist class, but outworn theories of *laissez faire*, backed up by pockets of vested interest and entrenched privilege. Wicksteed and Shaw had already “overthrown” Marx’s theory of value. Morris, who knew he was an amateur in economic theory, had put up little resistance. Now, in 1888 and 1889, the Fabian lecturers began to dispense with the theory of the class struggle or, rather, to employ the concept as a figure of speech when describing the struggles of the oppressed in the past, but to deny its application to Britain in the future.

But here they met with greater difficulties—the writings and teachings of Morris were thrown like a barrier across the way. In disputing Marx’s economic theory, they had only Hyndman and Aveling to encounter, neither of whom were accomplished masters of the theory themselves. But Morris’s breadth of knowledge, his profound historical understanding, were without equal in the Socialist movement, and every page of his Socialist writing served as a demonstration of the process of the class struggle. Typically, the Fabians failed to challenge his position; instead, they made a *détour*. In the autumn of 1888 Morris’s first collection of Socialist lectures, *Signs of Change*, was published. The unsigned review in *To-day*, now the Fabian journal (although still mis-titled the “Monthly Magazine of Scientific Socialism”) is worth quoting at length:

“Mr William Morris is about the only Socialist who can write with the pleasing certainty that his literary productions will be read, and, therefore, there lies upon him a weight of responsibility from which all we ordinary scribblers are delightfully free. Unfortunately the burden sits but airily on his brawny shoulders, and his utterances on the platform are apt to smack too much of the ‘hare-brained chatter of irresponsible frivolity.’ When such deliverances are made to a Socialist audience, who knows him and who overlooks the eccentricities of the lecturer in its liking for the man, the amount of harm done is a minus quantity. But when he takes to publishing his views it is a different matter, for many of them are such as to render Socialism a subject of mockery to sane men and women. For instance we gather from the little volume before us (a) that the author *desires* to bring about a civil war (p. 46),¹ and to create suffering for the purpose of intensifying

¹ For Morris’s words, see p. 632.

discontent (p 48),¹ and rejoices in the fact that the Socialists are still only a sect and not yet a party (p 52) ² Now we have no hesitation in saying that if once the hard-headed English workmen came to believe that these ideas of Mr Morris's were in any degree representative, the present by no means un-brilliant prospects of Socialism in England would vanish like a dream and all the good work of the last few years would be worse than undone Happily no such mistake is likely to be made for the rapid conversion of so many of our writers and lecturers to political methods has left Mr Morris almost alone in the possession of his peculiar views The effect of this change has been immensely to raise his value for us Just in proportion as the importance of the active propagandist declines so does the value of the poet and artist appreciate Some of Mr Morris's best services to Socialism may be seen in the Arts and Crafts Exhibition in Regent Street, some of his worst in the volume before us "

The line of argument is important, since upon this kind of "interpretation" a whole school of explaining-away-of-William-Morris was founded No open and frank controversy, no attempt to meet Morris's arguments and defeat them fairly, the only time when his views are referred to they are falsified, and the bulk of the "criticism" given over to insinuation, philistinism and condescension, so that the reader may emerge with a picture of a brawny, lovable and irresponsible man, with "eccentricities" and "peculiar views", of much more "value" to the Socialist movement designing tapestries than preaching Socialism. And yet, perhaps the Fabian critic did not care *quite* so much about human culture as he suggested, for the review continued

"On the historic and art critical essays in it we would venture humbly to protest that things artistic are hardly in quite so parlous a state as Mr Morris appears to think The fact is that when our Socialist artists and critics set about wailing over the 'Decline of Art' they use the term in much too restricted a sense The age which has produced Dickens and George Eliot, Balzac, Thackeray, Zola and

¹ "Semi-State-Socialistic measures", said Morris, might "entangle commerce in difficulties, and so add to discontent by creating suffering" Morris was demonstrating that, whichever road was taken, the downfall of capitalism was inevitable and was arguing *against* these "semi-Socialistic" measures and in favour of the direct revolutionary road

² Morris declared "I think it is quite possible that Socialism will remain a sect till the very eve of the last stroke that completes the revolution And is it not sects, bodies of definite, uncompromising principles, that lead us into revolutions? They may give birth to parties, though not parties themselves "

George Meredith, has little to fear from comparison with any of its predecessors. Of course the fact that we have good music and good landscapes, good novels and good portraits, is no reason why we should have hideous public buildings and drawing-room decorations which set the teeth on edge, but it is a reason why we should not be perpetually whining, however tunefully, about the 'Decline of Art'. To sum up, Socialists will do well to buy Mr Morris's latest book for they will derive thereupon much pleasure and some profit, but they had better keep it to themselves and not lend it to their, as yet unconverted, acquaintances"¹

It is hardly conceivable that Morris can have read this review without a passing twinge of bitterness, although he always set such personal feelings resolutely behind him, and, for his part, never descended to the argument from personality when dealing with differences between comrades in the movement. *Signs of Change* was one of his greatest achievements, one of the great achievements of the nineteenth century, the point of confluence of the moral protest of Carlyle and Ruskin, and the historical genius of Marx, backed by Morris's own lifetime of study and practice in the arts and in society. It is a book—agree with it or not—which places every honest reader in the presence of great issues of morality and history written, not by a lovable clown or childlike craftsman, but by a profoundly serious, cultured and responsible man. These Fabian lecturers—several of them had been drawn to the movement by his propaganda and example, he had helped them to clarify their minds, had invited them repeatedly to the Hammersmith Clubroom, had made them known in the movement. If he differed with them, he did so on points of principle which he made abundantly clear. This kind of philistine attack was to be expected from the declared enemies of the movement. But must it now come from within as well?

Looking back to-day we rightly value the constructive contributions to the movement of several of the original Fabians—notably of the Webbs and of Shaw. By contrast with the capitalist apologetics of the "Fabians" of the 1950s, their radical temper seems almost revolutionary. It is well to remember, at the same time, the role of Fabianism from the first. The Fabians, at their best, were the inheritors of the middle-class radical-democratic tradition, the logical successors of John Stuart Mill, John

¹ *To-day*, November, 1888.

Morley and Frederick Harrison. In theory they still looked forward to the achievement of Socialism by the nationalization of the means of production and exchange. But they had rejected Marx's theory of value, and could therefore believe in the possibility of "improving" Capitalism, rather than revolutionizing its economic basis. In practice they had ceased to believe, after "Bloody Sunday", that the working class was capable of revolutionary action, and of overthrowing the capitalist State. They stood in effect for the maximum number of reforms which could be won for the people *within the framework of capitalism*, without seriously endangering the existence of capitalism itself, without posing the final question of class power. In theory, again, they held that—after stronghold after stronghold had been captured or penetrated, in School Board, management committee, municipal government, or Parliament—a moment would come when the point of transition would be reached and Socialism would have arrived—"the world may wake up some morning to find that Socialism has come"¹

These ideas were implicit rather than explicit in the 700 lectures delivered by members of the Fabian Society in 1888, and the *Fabian Essays* published in 1889 show many variations of emphasis. But throughout them all, two central points were becoming blurred: the economic basis of exploitation in capitalist society, and the irreconcilable interests of the bourgeoisie and working-class—points upon which all the Socialist pioneers of 1883 and 1884 had been in agreement (see p. 384). Morris did not deny the possibility of winning reforms within the fabric of capitalism. Indeed, he had always prophesied that such reforms—"tubs to the whale"—would be offered by the capitalist parties themselves as a means of staving off revolution, and raising a privileged section of the working-class. But, if these reforms were far-reaching enough, he thought, they might well weaken Capitalism itself, thereby intensifying, rather than diminishing, class antagonisms, and bringing about a revolutionary crisis. It was precisely this conjecture, in his lecture *Whigs, Democrats and Socialists*, originally delivered at a Conference convened by the Fabian Society in June, 1886, which had aroused the indignation

¹ The words were actually used by Keir Hardie, but are implicit in many early Fabian lectures, especially those of Sidney Webb.

of the anonymous reviewer. Those who think they can deal with the capitalist system in a "piecemeal way", he had declared,

"very much underrate the strength of the tremendous organization under which we live. Nothing but a tremendous force can deal with this force, it will not suffer itself to be dismembered, nor to lose anything which really is its essence without putting forth all its force in resistance, rather than lose anything which it considers of importance, it will pull the roof of the world down upon its head. For, indeed, I grant these semi-Socialist Democrats that there is one hope for their tampering piecemeal with our Society, if by chance they excite people into seriously, however blindly, claiming one or other of these things in question, and could be successful in Parliament in driving it through, they would certainly draw on a great civil war, and such a war once let loose would not end but either with the full triumph of Socialism or its extinction for the present." ¹

During the second half of 1889 Morris seems to have prepared only one new major lecture, and it is no accident that this should have been entitled "The Class Struggle". In May, 1889, he had been reading Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*,² which was receiving widespread attention in England. In June he reviewed the book in *Commonweal*, and the train of thought was started which led to his writing *News from Nowhere*. Bellamy pictured the transition to Socialism as one of pacific inevitability. Looking back from the year 2000, he pictured the great American trusts growing to the point where they controlled the entire economic life of the nation. at which point, when "public opinion had become fully ripe", the great corporations and syndicates handed over the industry and commerce of the country to "a single syndicate representing the people".³ The "red-flag Socialists", so far from leading the struggle for this State syndicate, had hindered the march of evolution by frightening people with their propaganda. The reception accorded to this book, combined with many other pointers of the time—the first electoral success of London Socialism (returning John Burns to the L.C.C.), the changed tone of the capitalist Press towards the

¹ *Signs of Change* (1888), p. 46

² Morris to Glasier, May 13th, 1889 (Glasier, *op cit*, p. 198) "I suppose you have seen 'Looking Backward'. Thank you, I wouldn't care to live in such a cockney paradise as he imagines."

³ *Looking Backward*, Ch. V

dock strike, the social reforms increasingly advocated by such different men as Joseph Chamberlain, Lord Randolph Churchill, A J Mundella, Cardinal Manning and Jesse Collings, made it seem all the more important to Morris that Socialists should keep the main point—the essential antagonism of the classes—steadily before the workers “At present”, he wrote, “it is fashionable for even West-End dinner-parties to affect an interest” in Socialism, while “a certain tincture of Socialism . . . is almost a necessary ingredient . . . in a novel which aims at being at once serious and life-like”¹ Moreover, the gradual revival in trade after 1887 was providing conditions once more in which it was possible for limited reforms to be won. All these circumstances help to explain why Morris returned with such insistence to the essentials of Socialist theory in his lecture.

According to a report in the *Leeds Mercury* (March, 1890), Morris began by insisting that—

“in the phrase ‘the class struggle’ was involved not merely what was now called Socialism, but the whole of the progress of mankind from savagery to civilization . . . Seven or eight years ago . . . before Socialists began to make a stir . . . nobody, unless he had studied Socialism from a continental point of view, had any idea that there was or could be any possibility of change in the economical relations of men . . .”

Those Radicals who admitted the suffering of many of the workers attributed these, not to “the essentials of their position, but to the accidental defects of some of the men themselves”

“It was supposed that it was possible for a painstaking, careful, and perhaps rather stingy working man to raise himself out of the working class and become a member of the dominant class”

Such a view, Morris said, implied “an entire ignoring of anything like classes in the community . . . This view had been roughly shaken”.

“It was now admitted . . . that the workers were a class apart, that they had definite claims on society, and that those claims involved the bettering of the whole class of workers as a class”

This carried with it the realization that society must somehow be altered, and that this alteration would necessarily be “in the direction of Socialism”

¹ “Looking Backward”, *Commonweal*, June 22nd, 1889

“As Socialism drew near, and as it began to seem to have some practical bearing upon life, so evasions of the direct consequences of those admissions became more the rule amongst those classes who thought they had any reason to fear the change ”

Next he spoke of certain “evasions” already becoming popular

“The practical form which those evasions took was to try and push another class between the propertyless workers and their employers, to get more and more people interested in the present rights of property, so that there might be a broader basis for property to stand on ”

Among examples he pointed to the cry of “peasant proprietorship” in Ireland the allotment system for the farm labourers, “founded on the idea that when an agricultural labourer had been working as hard as he could all day he would be fit to give the dregs of his bodily capacity to cultivating a little bit of land for himself”, co-operative schemes, and “efforts such as those of the young gentlemen who were setting to work to teach art and history to the starvelings of the East of London”. Also among the “evasions” he listed the movement for the limitation of the hours of labour—“a good thing in itself”, but a dangerous red herring if it was put forward as a *substitute* “for the actual rights that he [the working man] could claim as the producer in society”.

“All that sort of thing”, he continued,

“did not mean Socialism, nor any approach to it, because Socialism was this that people shall work for themselves and administer for themselves, and that every State shall include the whole people, and not be composed of two classes ”

Such “evasions” were really “the last resource of the monopolists”, although in fact, he added (with some ambiguity), if they were carried “they would better enable the working class to carry Socialism through”.

No doubt there was confusion at this point—a standing apart from the day-to-day struggle. But the burden of Morris’s lecture was that in the course of the fight for limited gains it was the first duty of Socialists to make the character of the class struggle more, rather than less, clear. Any real or enduring improvement in the worker’s life, he declared, could only be won “by carrying

this class struggle, which had been going on for centuries, to the bitter end—by abolishing classes altogether” This could be achieved only by the overthrow of the “useless” classes, and the ownership by the “useful” classes of the means of production and this, in turn, could only be won by the *conscious* rebellion of the working class This rebellion need not be one of riot and bloodshed,

“if they ever did rebel in that sense of the world, they would be driven to do so they would not begin using brute force, but their masters would use it, and the people would be obliged to defend themselves, and he hoped they would do it well ”

Rebellion, as he used the word, meant, rather—

“the attacking of privilege at all points, the constant harassing of the monopolist capitalists by strikes and Trade Unions, the sacred boycott, bold speech where necessary, and the endurance of fine and imprisonment—these things perhaps might do what musketry could not do The spirit of a man who was prepared to undergo everything in the cause of freedom could not be subdued ”

No longer did he look forward so confidently—as he had done two years before—to the General Strike as the decisive blow “What was the hinge that Labour depended upon at present?” he asked.

“Coal-mining They therefore knew how they could enforce their claims by a strike of the coal-miners of the United Kingdom, backed by all the intelligence of labour That was one of the possible instruments of the rebellion which was perhaps not so far ahead of us ”¹

This was certainly at the opposite pole from Fabianism. Moreover, Morris’s emphasis upon the industrial struggle was more concrete here than it had been in “The Policy of Abstinence” in 1887. In the *Commonweal* for January 25th, 1890, Morris contributed a long review of the recently published *Fabian Essays* and joined issue closely and in matters of detail with the Fabian falsification of the class struggle in history He began by regretting that the book had not been produced three years before, when the writers’ economic understanding was still in the service of the revolutionary movement,

“whereas a large part of the present volume is given up to the advocacy

¹ *Leeds Mercury*, March 26th, 1890

of the fantastic and unreal tactic which the Fabian Society has excogitated of late. The result is that the clear exposition of the first principles of Socialism, and the criticism of the present false society (which latter no one knows how to make more damaging than Mr Bernard Shaw, *e.g.*) is set aside for the sake of pushing a theory of tactics, which could not be carried out in practice, and which, if it could be, would still leave us in a position from which we should have to begin our attack on capitalism over again."

Directly he singled out Sidney Webb as the "leader in this somewhat disastrous move. He seems to enjoy all the humiliations of opportunism, to revel in it . . .". Webb's "Historical" Essay had completely dismissed the class struggle from the centre of the stage, and replaced it with the now-familiar pieties about State regulation of industry (including the registration of hawkers, playing-card makers, pawn-brokers, etc., etc.) quietly ousting the anarchy of unchecked competition, so that the Post Office shone out as a Beacon of the Society to Be (Already in Webb's Essay we find all the materials for Mr Herbert Morrison's speeches "Slice after slice has gradually been cut from the profits of capital . . . Slice after slice has been cut off the incomes from rent and interest by the gradual shifting of taxation . . . Capitalism (in the imagery of the ball-room) was performing an "irresistible glide into collectivist Socialism" Indeed, reading Sidney Webb's Essay it is difficult to understand how Capitalism survived the publication of his judgement, let alone two world wars and three Labour Governments "He is so anxious" (Morris commented on his "rollicking opportunism")—

"He is so anxious to prove the commonplace that our present industrial system embraces some of the machinery by means of which a Socialist system *might* be worked . . . that his paper tends to produce the impression of one who thinks that we are already in the first stages of socialistic life . . ."

Logically, wrote Morris, Webb's "municipal Socialism" might seem to work, "yet *historically* it may do nothing of the kind the highly centralized municipal administration of the Roman Empire did not in the least alter the economic basis of chattel slavery" Webb's "historic" basis of Socialism he found to be unhistoric, inaccurate, and misleading. For example,

"his history only begins at the period just before the great industrial

revolution of the eighteenth century . Mr Sydney Webb has ignored the transition period of industry which began in the sixteenth century with the break up of the Middle Ages, and the shoving out of the people from the land The transition is treated of by Karl Marx with great care and precision under the name of the 'Manufacturing Period' (workshop period we might call it), and some mention of it ought to have been included in Mr Sydney Webb's 'history' "

The importance of this omission (apart from the ignorance or deliberate evasion of Marx's work, which Morris drew attention to) lay in the blurring of the distinctive character of capitalism, the essential basis of capitalist exploitation, and the replacement of it by a generalized and ill-defined concept, "industrialism" In the stage before the "industrial revolution" the workers were already subject to capitalist exploitation they "had a world market behind their backs though they were unconscious of it, the goods were made for profit, not primarily for use" Conversely, Morris argued, Socialism did not necessarily imply large-scale industrialism as an essential condition of its existence

Webb's mistake, Morris declared, was "to over-estimate the importance of the *mechanism* of a system of society apart from the *end* towards which it may be used" This error he found present in the other essayists, in particular Graham Wallas

"Socialism is emphatically not merely 'a system of property-holding', but a complete theory of human life, founded indeed on the visible necessities of animal life, but including a distinct system of religion, ethics, and conduct, which, will not indeed enable us to get rid of the tragedy of life but will enable us to meet it without fear and without shame "

Annie Besant's Essay he dismissed with a polite snort, as "State Socialism in its crudest form", but he reserved some friendly words for Hubert Bland and especially for Shaw

"His criticism of the modern capitalistic muddle is so damaging, his style so trenchant, and so full of reserves of indignation and righteous scorn, that I sometimes wonder that *guilty*, i.e. non-Socialist, middle-class people can sit and listen to him If he could only forget the Sydney-Webbian permeation tactic what an advantage it would be to us all! He would encourage his friends thereby, and as to his enemies—could he offend them more than he does now?"

"A good man fallen among Fabians"—how many times have other Socialists echoed Morris's regret!

Here came the great parting of the ways in the modern Socialist movement. Morris's article, despite its many excellent thrusts, was not one of his best. It was written at a time when other interests were commanding his main attention—as if his mind had been dragged back unwillingly to the subject and he had put down his reflections as they came, without careful meditation and order. But still—how much more open, fraternal and responsible than the anonymous Fabian sneers! Thereafter the Fabians left Morris alone—perhaps they could not answer his objections, perhaps they did not wish to draw attention to them. From time to time they co-operated with each other (see p. 696), and after Morris's death Shaw made a half-hearted attempt to claim him for the Fabians—an attempt which his intellectual integrity forced him to abandon in his later years. The Fabians were navigating the hard-headed British workman towards the “by no means un-brilliant future” of the “Welfare State” and they left behind them “the Revolution” and William Morris with his “peculiar views”

V *Morris and the Anarchists*

“Such finish to what of education in practical Socialism as I am capable of I received . . . from some of my Anarchist friends, from whom I learned, quite against their intention, that Anarchism was impossible . . .”—so Morris was to write in *Justice* five years later.¹ This “education” was of two kinds—theoretical and practical.

The theoretical controversy between Morris and the Anarchists need not claim much attention. Morris was never seriously interested in theoretical Anarchism, despite his liking for Kropotkin, and consequently he never really exerted his mind to controvert the Anarchist positions. Throughout the “parliamentary” struggle within the League and the campaign of sympathy with the Chicago Martyrs, he had taken care to differentiate his own position from Anarchism. In April, 1889, a comrade named James Blackwell had written to *Commonweal* to initiate a discussion on “Communist-Anarchism”, quoting with sympathy some resolutions of the Spanish Anarchists.

¹ “How I Became a Socialist”, *Justice*, June 16th, 1894.

"1 By Anarchism we understand a social state in which there is no necessity for government. Whilst the principle of authority exists, there will be no guarantee for the liberty of all members of society. The principle of authority always degenerates into tyranny."

"2 Since we recognize that a society will never be completely Anarchist whilst there remains in it the least authoritarianism or subjection, we must also recognize as a guarantee of liberty the abolition of the principle of private property and of the exploitation of man by man."¹

This was turning Socialism upside-down with a vengeance. In May, Morris took up the discussion. With an eye to the disintegrating unity of the League, he sought to subdue all polemical spirit, and seek for points of agreement rather than differences.

"I will begin by saying that I call myself a Communist, and have no wish to qualify that word by joining any other to it. The aim of Communism seems to me to be the complete equality of condition for all people, and anything in a Socialist direction which stops short of this is merely a compromise—a halting-place on the road. Communism also will have to keep itself free of superstition. Its ethics will have to be based on the recognition of natural cause and effect, and not on rules derived from *a priori* ideas of the relation of man to the universe or some imagined ruler of it, and from these two things, the equality of condition and the recognition of the cause and effect of material nature, will grow all Communistic life."

So far he could "see clearly." "all genuine Socialists admit that Communism is the necessary development of Socialism, but . . . further than this all must be speculative." Rather than speculate, he showed in a common-sense manner the impossibility of the Anarchist position. "if freedom from authority means the assertion of the advisability or possibility of an individual man doing what he pleases always and under all circumstances, this is an absolute negation of society, and makes Communism . . . impossible." Even in Communist society, differences of opinion would arise (examples of which he gave) which must be settled by the vote and authority of the majority so far as possible this "authority" would take the form, not of force, but of "that something . . . made up of the aspirations of our better selves, . . . the *social conscience* without which there can be no true society".

On his return from the Paris Congress he found he had to deal

¹ *Commonweal*, April 13th, 1889

with a whole host of further objections, mostly based upon speculations as to the manner of settlement of differences in a Communist community. Once again he met these with arguments of practical common sense, asserting throughout a social as opposed to individualistic approach, and insisting upon the importance of the development within Communist society of the *social* conscience ("which being social is common to every man") as a check to all tendencies towards arbitrary authority. "Without that", he declared, "there can be no society, and further . . . man without society is not only impossible, but inconceivable."¹

On one point Morris acknowledged his sympathy with the "Anarchist-Communist" position—by temperament he was opposed to a great industrial civilization, centred on large towns, and he looked forward impatiently to the re-emergence in Communist society of a life based upon small communes and villages. But he took pains to differentiate this speculative question from more essential matters of Socialist theory. Indeed, it was from this region that he drew one of his examples of the necessity for individual submission to collective decisions, as it affected *his* temperament.

"I have always believed that the realization of Socialism would give us an opportunity of escaping from that grievous flood of utilitarianism which the full development of the society of contract has cursed us with, but that would be in the long run only, and I think it quite probable that in the early days of Socialism the reflex of the terror of starvation, which so oppresses us now, would drive us into excesses of utilitarianism. So that it is not unlikely that the public opinion of a community would be in favour of cutting down all the timber in England, and turning the country into a big Bonanza farm or a market-garden under glass. And in such a case what could we do, who objected 'for the sake of life to cast away the reasons for living', when we had exhausted our powers of argument? Clearly we should have to submit to authority."

Once again it is possible to see how this controversy (like the reflections caused by reading *Looking Backward*) were urging his mind towards the creation of *News from Nowhere*.

Of the *practical* education which Morris received at the hands

¹ See *Commonweal*, May 18th and August 17th, 1889, for Morris's contributions to the correspondence.

of the Anarchists, a good deal has already been said. Anarchist theory tended in the direction of the liquidation of *all* organization, not only in the Anarchist society of the future, but also in the struggle for its realization. Joseph Lane had long resisted on the League's Council any permanent Chairman or acknowledged "leader"—although Morris had inevitably filled this role. Now James Blackwell quoted with approval from the Spanish resolutions, the demand that "no statutes or rules of conduct" be imposed upon the organization "to each individual, to each group. . . is left the study and the means which they will find most suitable to secure the triumph of Anarchism." The utmost that could be permitted was a "Centre of relations and statistics", without initiative, leadership, or disciplinary powers. Morris, for fear of breaking up the League completely on the parliamentary issue, had tolerated the tendency towards virtual autonomy in the branches. Now the tendency began to become marked *within* the branches as well. Rival groups contended for leadership, and the Anarchists—so opposed to organization in general—organized *factions* a great deal more effectively than the weakened and bewildered anti-parliamentary Communists. When *without* official position, they constituted an opposition; when *with* official positions they had an excuse for inactivity. "I am quite mad at the carelessness of our *Weal* Secretary . . . in not sending the money regularly", Bruce Glasier wrote in February, 1890, to Frank Kitz, the League Secretary.

"He is unfortunately an Anarchist . . . and fails to see the reasonableness . . . of duly accounting to his London comrades month by month"¹

Possibly this was just a humorous excuse—a shaft aimed at Kitz himself—since the Glasgow Branch had always been backward in its finances. But there was more than a grain of truth in it, and the disintegration of the League went on apace.

VI *Artistic and Intellectual Colleagues*

There was one small section of the public among whom Morris's views were making some headway in the last two years

¹ Brit Mus Add MSS 46345

of the League. Despite the trend of "advanced" intellectuals towards Fabianism, a small number of young intellectuals, students and artists (who were repelled by the philistinism of the Fabian Society) were attracted towards the Socialist movement—less by Morris's arguments than by his rich personality and his personal example.

The Hammersmith Clubroom was the centre of this intellectual life. It became even fashionable for the young *avant-garde* of the bourgeoisie to pay at least one visit to the converted outhouse, and there was competition to be among those invited by Morris to supper with a few of the comrades after the meeting "Something—none of us knew how to define it, but we called it generally the Capitalist System . . . was wasting life for us and we were beginning to realize as much"—so H G Wells, a science student at the time, recalled "Socialism was then a splendid new-born hope. Wearing our red ties to give zest to our frayed and shabby costumes we went great distances through the gas-lit winter streets of London and by the sulphureous Underground Railway, to hear and criticize and cheer and believe in William Morris, Bernard Shaw, Hubert Bland, Graham Wallas and all the rest of them, who were to lead us to that millennial world." He recalled them lecturing in the Hammersmith outhouse, Graham Wallas, "drooping, scholarly, and fastidiously lucid", "a lean young Shaw", "a raw aggressive Dubliner . . . with a thin flame-coloured beard beneath his white illuminated face", and William Morris, who—

"used to stand up with his back to the wall, with his hands behind him when he spoke, leaning forward as he unfolded each sentence, and punctuating with a bump back to position"¹

Morris did not always relish this attention, especially when it came from comfortable philistines, interested only in getting a glimpse of the picturesque author of *The Earthly Paradise* and manager of the Firm. Sometimes visitors of this sort got more than they bargained for, when they presented some anti-Socialist cliché in the discussion. "What he could not stand was smug respectability and cant", one working-class member of the Hammersmith League recalled.

¹ H G Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*.

"If an opponent came forward, however illiterate, but with honest purpose, Morris was delighted, he was just the reverse with hypocritical criticism"¹

What "just the reverse" implied has become proverbial—Morris's great rages were more rare than has sometimes been suggested, but when they came they were not quickly forgotten, as at least one volume of Victorian reminiscences testifies

"His thick curly hair was massed above his forehead and always in confusion because of his habit of running his hands through it in moments of excitement, and oftener than not he was excited. He was weak on argument. In amiable mood, his retort to straying sheep might be, 'My comrade does not believe it in his heart.' But, as a rule, he lost his temper and said nasty things. At one long-remembered meeting he worked himself up to the verge of apoplexy, calling his opponent every possible bad name, lost his voice in the process and did not recover it all evening."²

It is not difficult to guess that this particular writer was at least associated with the target of Morris's "nasty" words!

Not all the middle-class visitors came from mere curiosity or fashion. Morris was intensely concerned to build up a nucleus of intellectuals, identified heart and soul with the Cause, and wherever he found ardour and integrity he extended the warmth of his friendship. The young W. B. Yeats, self-absorbed and self-dramatizing, was one of those who found his way to the League's Clubroom. MORRIS quickly found him out, invited him frequently to supper, and meeting him by chance in the street praised his recently-published *Wanderings of Usheen* saying, "You write my sort of poetry"—and would have said more "had he not caught sight of a new ornamental cast-iron lamp-post and got very heated upon the subject". To the young poet, Morris, with his "spontaneity and joy", was "chief of men". "No man I have known was so well loved, you saw him producing everywhere organization and beauty, seeming, almost in the same instant, helpless and triumphant." Even in late life, Yeats paid

¹ Reminiscence of R. A. Muncey in *The Leaguer*, October, 1907. See also Rowley, *Fifty Years of Work Without Wages*. "It was delightful to watch his patience when the same old questions were asked by labouring men, or his vehemence when flooring some well-to-do jabberer—often a mere *rentier*, who assumed he was advocating robbery."

² *Life and Letters of Joseph Pennell*, by E. R. Pennell, Vol. I, pp. 158-9

him the finest possible tribute—"if some angel offered me the choice, I would choose to live his life rather than my own or any other man's" But, for all this, Yeats stubbornly repelled the principles he taught His Socialist strivings ended abruptly

"The attitude towards religion of almost everybody but Morris, who avoided the subject altogether, got upon my nerves, for I broke out after some lecture or other with all the arrogance of raging youth They attacked religion, I said and yet there must be a change of heart and only religion could make it What was the use of talking about some new revolution putting all things right, when the change must come with astronomical slowness Morris rang his chairman's bell, but I was too angry to listen, and he had to ring it a second time before I sat down He said that night at supper, 'Of course I know there must be a change of heart, but it will not come as slowly as all that I rang my bell because you were not being understood' He did not show any vexation, but I never returned after that night"¹

This was inevitable, perhaps Yeats could not be at home in the company of blunt working-class comrades like the one who told him to his face that "I had talked more nonsense in one evening than he had heard in the whole course of his past life" But the anecdote reveals also Morris's discernment from the casual and shallow intellectual, the complacent cliché about a "change of heart" never failed to arouse his wrath, but coming on the flood of Yeats' nervous rage, he understood the sincerity and hatred of utilitarian values which flung the objection forth

It must have been sad to Morris to have seen so many pass through the movement, like Yeats, as birds of passage, or, like Wells, inclining their attention to the sophistries of the Fabians There were a few intellectuals in the provinces who gave the League constant support—Rev. John Glasse at Edinburgh, R. F. Muirhead, lecturer in Mathematics at Glasgow University and active propagandist, and Raymond Unwin, the architect, at Chesterfield—a frequent contributor to *Commonweal* But, apart from these few, one group only could be relied upon to give him support and it was held together only in part by Socialist principle, in part by affection for the man, and in part by common artistic interests and activity Chief among them were Philip Webb, Walter Crane (whose pen and brush was always at the service of the movement) and Emery Walker, Secretary of the

¹ W B Yeats, *Autobiographies* (1926), pp 183-4

Hammersmith Branch and close colleague of Morris in the Kelmscott Press among younger men were Cobden-Sanderson, the binder, Catterson-Smith, the engraver, and Sir Sydney Cockerell. Around them, again, was a larger group of men and women, many of whose names have been notable in the history of the visual arts in this century, who were more or less influenced by his ideas.

Several among this group of friends were far from being revolutionaries. Morris no longer regarded his work in the Firm as a part of the "holy warfare" against the age, and there is evidence that in the Eighties he looked askance at tendencies towards preciousness within the "arts and crafts" movement which his own example had helped to engender, and at those who tended to turn the movement into a sufficient end in itself. "Morris began to talk about my prices", Cobden-Sanderson noted in his diary some months after he had taken to book-binding (on "Janey's" advice) as a means to spiritual salvation

"[He] thought my work too costly, bookbinding should be 'rough', did not want to multiply the minor arts (!), went so far as to suggest that some machinery should be invented to bind books"¹

Humph! That was a clout from an unexpected quarter! No doubt there was something in "Cobden-S's" subjective motivations, his desire to turn the League into a Socialist Charity Organization Society, and his "cosmic" mooning, which rubbed up the bristles on Morris's back. Cobden-Sanderson retaliated in the privacy of his diary, June 1st, 1888

"At Croydon the other day Morris and Belfort Bax sniffed at Land Nationalization as not going to the root of things. Simple people! Does their own 'League' then, go within measurable distance of it?"

On November 8th he was grumbling at Morris's insistence upon calling "the social movement" the "war of classes". By March, 1891, his Socialism had taken a thoroughly cosmic turn.

"I feel that Socialism wants extricating from the ideas of property, ownership, possession, etc., and establishing as a co-operative effort to build up a beautiful humanity."

What could Morris do with material like this?

As a matter of fact, he did little beyond extend his goodwill

¹ *The Journals of T. J. Cobden-Sanderson*, entry for March 21st, 1885

towards every genuine and seriously-intended project initiated by younger men, some of whom had no sympathy with his Socialist opinions, but acknowledged his authority as the leader of the artistic movement to which they belonged. The Art Workers' Guild (founded in 1884), the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society (first launched in 1888) and the "unofficial" but widely representative Art Congresses at Liverpool (1888) and Edinburgh (1889) were all promoted with Morris's sympathetic advice and co-operation rather than active initiation.¹ Once they were under way, he gave these projects his services: he lectured for them, wrote articles, and did committee-work. He encouraged them in their guerrilla warfare against the Royal Academy and all its works—a warfare in which he had been engaged from the days in which he, Burne-Jones and Rossetti had worked together in the Red Lion Square studio. The Edinburgh Art Congress of October, 1889, was even looked upon in the Press as a Socialist demonstration, with some of the main papers delivered by Walter Crane, Cobden-Sanderson, Emery Walker and Morris himself,² and its effect upon many young artists and architects was deeper and more lasting than Morris would have recognized.

In the last two years of the League these activities claimed more of his attention than he had given to them in its first four years. But—with the exception of his work for the "Anti-Scrape", which he now resumed with enthusiasm—his participation was qualified, as if he was withholding some of his energies. Perhaps he foresaw the shadow of "Cobden-S" and his like blighting a part of the movement, and turning it over to sandals and fads. "You understand that I would not have gone merely for the Art gammon and spinach", he wrote to Glasier of a professional lecture which he delivered in Glasgow early in 1889 "but it was an opportunity of seeing you chaps free of expense"³ And to Glasse he wrote later in the year "I would not have thought of going to the Art Congress unless I had hoped to have been some use to our Scotch Comrades"⁴ The majority of the papers at the Congress he found "monumentally dull"

¹ See Mackail, II, pp. 196 f., and Morris, "Talk and Art", *Commonweal*, December 22nd, 1888.

² See Glasier's full account, *op cit*, pp. 84-94, *Letters*, pp. 319-20, Mackail, II, pp. 225-6.

³ Glasier, *op cit*, p. 198.

⁴ *Unpublished Letters*, p. 14.

"It goes without saying that, though there were people present who were intent on playing the part of Art-philanthropists, all the paper readers, except the declared Socialists, showed an absurd ignorance of the very elements of economics, and also the general feeling was an ignoring of the existence of the working class except as instruments to be played on ."¹

The "Art-philanthropists" annoyed him most—who thought of art as "a kind of mumbo-jumbo fetishism for the working class"—"Just the sort of tommy rot that curates talk about religion at mothers' meetings, and Oxford professors say about education at Cutlers' Feasts"² Only two features redeemed the Congress the fact that "we managed to get a good deal of Socialism into our discourses", and the warm response of the audiences of workmen to whom he and the other Socialists gave papers on the technique of their crafts

In truth, Morris had lost serious hope of any widespread revival of any of the arts within capitalist society, and there is no evidence at all to suggest that in these years he was turning back to art as an *alternative* to political action His own art he thought of as a source of enjoyment and relaxation, and as he saw that the League had failed, and began to feel old age coming upon him, he allowed himself to indulge in his own pleasures more and more But he thought of his art as a private indulgence, not as a public act When, three years after the Edinburgh Congress, Glasier wrote to invite him to do an art lecture in Glasgow, Morris refused

"I am the less troubled at not being able to give the art lecture as I am rather sick of putting matters before people which they cannot attend to under the Present State of things—let 'em turn Socialists!"³

So much for the commentators who have suggested that Morris returned, after 1889, to his original aims of the early Firm, and forgot his momentary Socialist aberration—"Let 'em turn Socialists!"

VII The "Hobbledeboys" Triumph

Morris's incredible energy was at last beginning to show signs of flagging "I am about from pillar to post very much in these

¹ *Commonweal*, November 9th, 1889

² Glasier, *op cit*, p 89

³ Glasier MSS, October 11th, 1892.

days", he wrote to the ailing Joynes on November 28th, 1889, "which to you who are so kept in may seem jolly, but to me is not so I find that people will insist in looking on me as a young man, and expect work out of me accordingly I shall have to turn round on them soon if they don't look out "

"The movement is going on curiously now, it seems to me", the letter continued

"So many of our hopes in small matters overthrown, and on the wider scale of things going on so much faster than we dared to hope "¹

His writing was occupying much of his time *The Roots of the Mountains* was finished in 1889, and *The Story of the Glittering Plain* written early in 1890 In 1890, also, he was revising for re-publication some of his earlier poems, collecting and revising the *Poems By the Way*, preparing translations for the Saga Library, and studying typography as a prelude to founding the Kelmscott Press Above all, it was in 1890, in this mixed mood of temporary despondency and profounder hope, that he made his greatest imaginative contribution to the Cause for it was in this year that *News from Nowhere* was issued in instalments in *Commonweal*

This was work and enough for any ordinary man in his full strength, and—while he continued his work for *Commonweal*, frequent lectures, open-air meetings and committee-work for the League and his own branch—the volume of this work fell off perceptibly in 1890 Every month brought fresh signs of the break-up of the League In the autumn of 1889 the Edinburgh Branch amalgamated with the local branch of the S D F , and formed (together with other surviving outposts of Mahon's propaganda for the Scottish Land and Labour League) the Scottish Socialist Federation There remained in being as effective branches of the League outside of London the branches at Glasgow, Leicester, Norwich and Yarmouth—all under Anarchist influence, the branches at Leeds, Bradford, Manchester and Aberdeen—all of a firm "parliamentary" persuasion, and acting in effect as independent societies, and a few scattered groups at Walsall, and elsewhere In February, 1890, Glasier was writing from Glasgow to Frank Kitz of the "downright apathy of our members" ² In Leeds, Bradford, Manchester and Aberdeen the tale

¹ Brit Mus Add MSS 45345.

² *Ibid* , 46345

was quite otherwise, for here the Leaguers were in the very forefront of the gathering mass movement. In November, 1889, Paylor of Leeds found time to write a hasty note to *Commonweal* the victorious Builders' Labourers' Union (p. 619) was firmly established, with 900 members—a demonstration of 5,000 gas-workers had been held, and they were being organized from the League clubrooms for the bitter, and even violent, struggle which was to follow. Maguire had been approached by the tailoresses, and had already helped them to organize a union of 1,500 members, of whom 600 girls were on strike. At Halifax the month before a demonstration of 9,000 gas-stokers and sympathizers was held, "*Commonweal* sold well", and Maguire and his comrades had assisted in forming a branch of the Gasworkers' Union. Alf. Mattison, although an engineer, had been elected honorary Secretary, and Will Thorne had come up to give his advice.¹ The Leaguers at Bradford—among them Bland, Minty and the young F. W. Jowett—followed the lead of Leeds.² The influence of the Socialists among the textile workers began to grow apace—Ben Turner, one of the youngest and most influential of the officers of the General Union of Textile Workers joining the Leeds League in 1889.³ Section after section of the unskilled came to Maguire and his comrades for aid, and with their help were organized unions of the Jewish tailoring workers, of clothing workers, dyers, wood-carriers, engineers' labourers, maltsters and others.

Had this development taken place in London, with Leaguers among the prominent leaders, then Morris's last years might have taken a somewhat different course. As it was, the Yorkshire movement—one of the swiftest in growth and most remarkable in the country, outside of the East End—brought no additional strength to the Council of the League. It was rather the reverse. Both the League and the *Commonweal* were becoming a hindrance to Maguire and his friends in their work. "Here we have *Commonweal*!" one miners' agent in Scotland had thundered at a meeting a year or two before,

¹ *Commonweal*, *passim*, papers and notebooks of Alf. Mattison, *Tom Maguire a Remembrance*, pp. xiv-xvi (by Alf. Mattison).

² See Fenner Brockway, *Sixty Years of Socialism* (1946), pp. 29-30.

³ See Ben Turner, *About Myself*, and *Short History of the General Textile Workers Union*, p. 181.

"the *largest* Socialist paper in the country' Edited by William Morris, the greatest poet, painter, designer, and art critic of the age' Cram-full of news about the labour struggle in America, France, Germany, Italy, and Russia' Tells you how you are robbed and who robs you' Tells you what the Social Revolution means, how it can be brought about, and when it will be brought about' Stirring labour songs . . . reports of Socialist meetings all over the country' Only a few copies left!"¹

In 1889, with the *Labour Elector* in the field, this line of sales-talk was not so impressive nor did the contents of the paper go far to justify it. The number of the *Commonweal* which sold so well at the gas-workers' demonstration in Halifax contained indifferent "Notes" by Sparling and Nicoll; a frothy "address" by Frank Kitz, which turned its back (with much revolutionary bluster) upon the new unionism, and urged the provincial comrades to "sally into the villages and fields with the cry of 'Back to the Land' The Land for the People!" (a throw-back, this, to his early propaganda of the late 1870s with Joseph Lane), notes from Australia and South Africa, and four pages of small type giving news of the Labour movement, notices and announcements, etc. And this was an average number, unusual only in the absence of anything from Morris's pen. The gas-workers would find little in the paper directly touching upon their lives and struggles, no militant call to action upon any burning issue, no close and informed discussion of any industrial problem.

No wonder the Leeds comrades began in 1888 (rather guiltily) to take copies of Keir Hardie's *Miner*, no wonder they turned now with interest to the *Labour Elector* and sought to influence the *Yorkshire Factory Times* (founded in 1889). One thing only held them to the League—their loyalty for William Morris Maguire, in particular, who was now the ablest working-class leader left in the League, thoroughly understood and shared Morris's revolutionary outlook, and himself stood in a position midway between Morris and his old friend, J. L. Mahon, who returned to Leeds in 1890. If they had made their own choice, Maguire, Tom Paylor, Alf Mattison and a few others might have remained technically members of the League until Morris himself was driven out. In March, 1890, when Morris lectured in Leeds on "The Class Struggle", Maguire and Paylor officiated at the

¹ "Humours of Propaganda", by J. Bruce Glasier, *Commonweal*, October 27th, 1888

meeting Only a few weeks later the branch fell apart The occasion was the violent termination of the great Leeds gas strike, in a shower of brickwork and masonry poured over a railway bridge on to a convoy of blacklegs, and a pitched battle in the streets by strikers and their wives, against the soldiers and police. Throughout these events Maguire kept his head like a mature leader, rather than a young man of twenty-four, and piloted the strike to victory Meanwhile, the Anarchist party within the branch, led by H B Samuels, aimed a blow at his rear In July Maguire wrote of the dissension to Edward Carpenter

“There has been such a tumpus raised by a few demented Anarchists here—since the gas-riots—that it has become impossible for us to work together any longer As usual with Socialists when they fall out, all kinds of personal attacks and insinuations have been the order of the day I have withdrawn from the club since I find it more than my nerves can stand to be continually warring with a parcel of raving fools in public and private over matters which are the outcome of personal feeling and not principle Perhaps the real issue is which of the two courses is the correct one to take bearing in mind the events of the gasworkers’ struggle Those of us who had to do with the gasworkers, in response to the men’s wishes and in accordance with our ideas of policy, considered a Labour Electoral League should be formed, and accordingly this was done

“Our Anarchist friends, who were conspicuous by their absence in the gas fights, joined issue with us at once, attacked not only the League but ourselves, and finally told the people that no policy should be entertained but physical force Now, while I believe in the *use* of physical force when necessary I think it is midsummer madness to advocate it on the public platform, and it is unlikely, as it would be undesirable, for the people to resort to it until other means had been tried and found wanting I admit the Labour Electoral move is not all to be desired, but it seemed the next immediate step to take in order to keep the Labour unions militant, and to emphasize the conflict of the workers and the employers ”

As for the rest, the Anarchists remained in possession of the remnants of the branch, and “if our Anarchist friends can make the Leeds folk into revolutionists no one will be more pleasantly surprised and mightily satisfied than yours fraternally, T Maguire”¹ Except for the turn towards parliamentary action, which Morris was not yet ready to countenance, events at Leeds

¹ *Tom Maguire a Remembrance*, p xi-xii

foreshadowed Morris's own virtual ejection from the League a few months later

At Aberdeen a few Leaguers were playing an equally prominent part in the new unionism, while in Manchester, Leonard Hall, no older than Maguire, and also of great ability, was leading the Leaguers in similar struggles.¹ Meanwhile, in London, two groups of ex-Leaguers were striving to bring part of the unskilled movement under their leadership. Mahon, Donald and Binning strove to set their "Labour Union" afloat on the tide of new unionism, and claimed the credit for forming the Coal Porters' Union in September, 1889. Next they turned to the London postmen, but their confident attempt to organize from the outside one of the most difficult trades in the country ended in total disaster in July, 1890, with the failure of the strike at Mount Pleasant and the victimization of scores of workers. Neither Mahon nor Donald ever recovered their reputation in the South after this fiasco, and (however much their errors were exaggerated by their enemies within and without the movement) there is no doubt that a heavy responsibility for the failure of the strike rested upon them, since their amateurish conduct of the affair, and their innate tendency to intrigue, gave colour to the suspicions and dissensions sown by their opponents among the ranks of the workers.²

¹ Leonard Hall, born 1866, was the son of Dr Spencer Hall. "Cast on his own resources" at the age of thirteen, he worked as a railway porter, deck-hand, and in the U.S. as a farmhand and docker before returning to Manchester in the late 1880s. See *Labour Prophet*, February, 1894. For the Manchester League, see also "Revolutionary Reminiscences" by "J B S" in *Co-operative News*, August 5th, 1905.

² For an unsympathetic account of Mahon's part in this unfortunate business, see Swift, *A History of Postal Agitation* (1900), pp. 203 ff. "Whatever qualities of leadership Mr Mahon may have possessed, he lacked individuality. His personality was certainly not Napoleonic; he could deliver a good address, but there was always something lacking in the uncommanding figure in the shabby blue serge suit." Swift claimed that Mahon sapped the confidence of the postmen by surrounding the Union in an extraordinary atmosphere of secrecy and espionage. At a critical moment in the dispute, the Executive of the Union split (Tom Dredge, a victimized postman, Fred Henderson, and W. A. Chambers breaking with Mahon and Donald, and attacking each other in the Press), and Mahon, Donald, and Binning rejected the offer of Burns and Champion to join the Executive in an effort to save the situation. Swift complains (p. 214) that Mahon concentrated his efforts on securing the right of public meeting, and thus the postmen "were betrayed into pursuing the ideal

The work of the Avelings and of the Bloomsbury Socialist Society was far more constructive. On August 17th, 1889, Engels wrote to Sorge

“There are now prospects here for the development of a live socialist organization which will gradually cut the ground from under the feet of the S D F or absorb it. The Socialist League is no good at all. It consists wholly of anarchists, and Morris is their puppet. The plan is to get up agitation for the Eight Hour day in the democratic and radical clubs—our recruiting grounds here—and in the trade unions, and also organize a demonstration on May 1st, 1890.”

“The plan” succeeded better than his most optimistic hopes. Eleanor Marx-Aveling, as counsellor to the gas-workers and friend to Will Thorne, was already in the heart of the “new unionism”. As Engels was writing, the Dock Strike was beginning to set the whole East End on the move. The Bloomsbury Socialist Society directed its main efforts in the first months of 1890 towards bringing the widest possible section of London workers to carry out the decision of the Paris Congress to observe May Day as a day of international demonstration of the solidarity of labour in the demand for a legal Eight-hour Day. Stage by stage the “New Unions”, the small skilled unions, and, finally, the London Trades Council, in which the old skilled unions were still predominant, gave their support to the plan. So impressive was the unity achieved in the campaign that the Avelings took the leading part in promoting a “Legal Eight Hours and International Labour League”, with wide trade union affiliation, whose first object was “the formation of a distinct Labour Party” to obtain the limitation of hours of labour and improvement in the factory acts and electoral laws.

Official League and official S D F stood apart from the campaign: the S D F through Hyndman’s hostility to the Paris Congress and its decisions, the League out of characteristic purism. Morris, and the League in general, were heartily in

of an abstract principle in preference to urging their more useful and legitimate demand for boots and better wages. The course of events, from Mahon’s point of view, is recorded in *The Postman’s Gazette*, a penny sheet issued in the early summer of 1890, which reveals the tremendous problems involved in organizing from outside workers subject to immediate dismissal for trade union activities, and also the amateurish way in which Mahon and Donald failed to get the backing of the organized workers of London for the postmen’s struggle.

agreement with an international May Day, as a day of international solidarity and Socialist demonstrations, but they declared the eight-hours' question to be a secondary issue, raised by the London organizers to undue prominence. Moreover, they declared inflexibly for May 1st—the day when the German workers had declared their decision to demonstrate—whereas the London Trades Council could only be brought to support the demonstration if it were to be held on the first Sunday in May, the 4th. For the sake of this principle, which they held to honestly in the belief that they were acting true to international fraternity, they rejected the chance of sharing in the leadership of one of the greatest British working-class demonstrations since the last days of Chartism. And, in the result, two May Days were held in London in 1890: a gathering of several thousand under the banner of the League at Clerkenwell Green on the 1st; and the demonstration, over 100,000 strong, at Hyde Park on May 4th, of which Engels exclaimed in delight—"the grandchildren of the old Chartists are entering the line of battle"¹ Well might Engels, deeply moved by this revival for which he had waited impatiently for forty years, grumble at the League,

"which looks down on everything which is not directly revolutionary (which means here in England everything which does not limit itself to making phrases and otherwise doing nothing) and the Federation, who still behave as if everyone except themselves were asses and bunglers, although it is only due to the new force of the movement that *they* have succeeded in getting some following again. In short, anyone who only looks at the surface would say it was all confusion and personal quarrels. But *under* the surface the movement is going on and the day is no longer far off when this mass will suddenly *find itself* and when that day comes short work will be made of all the rascality and wrangling"²

One thing, at any rate, was clear after this May Day—the League was no longer fit to give leadership to any section of the British workers. Only fourteen delegates were present at the Sixth Annual Conference, held on May 25th, 1890. The "Anarchist-Communists" were triumphant all along the line: they elected their own group in a solid bloc onto the Executive Council leaving Morris isolated with Webb and two of the

¹ See *Marx-Engels Sel. Cor.*, p. 469

² Engels to Sorge, April 19th, 1890, *ibid.*, p. 468

Hammersmith Branch. and (a note on the Conference adds) "the delegates were saved the trouble of confirming any new rules, as the late Council had sense enough to make none"¹ Greatest triumph of all, William Morris and Sparling were ejected from the editorship of *Commonweal*, and Kitz and Nicoll elected in their place² Morris endured the proceedings with a mixture of good humour and contempt Questioned closely about his financial statement as Treasurer, he finally remarked, with a shade of bitterness, "Well, Mr. Chairman, I can't see that it matters a damn, for I receive £10 in one hand, and with the other I pay out £50"³ As the room thickened with tobacco smoke and revolutionary bluster, he busied his hands with flower-patterns and lettering on his agenda-paper, in the end flinging himself back in his chair and growling, "Mr Chairman, *can't* we get on with the business? I want my TEA!" At tea he sat next to Tom Barclay of Leicester, and gave relief to his suppressed irritation in literary criticism Barclay spoke of Meredith Morris dug his fist into his palm and declared vehemently. "Meredith! He tweaks you by the nose, he makes me feel I'd like to punch his head!"⁴ At ten the Conference broke up, and the Hammersmith group went back on the underground For a few moments they stood on the embankment and watched the lights and traffic on the Thames "The wind's in the West", said Morris "I can almost smell the country"⁵ It is no far conjecture to suggest that *News from Nowhere*, Kelmescott and Ellen, were in his mind "He found himself musing on the subject-matter of discussion, but still discontentedly and unhappily 'If I could but see a day of it', he said to himself, 'if I could but see it!'" It is in this very mood that *News from Nowhere* had been begun

¹ *Commonweal*, May 31st, 1890

² The inner history of this event is given in a letter from H. H. Sparling to R. Steele "You know how 'Weal has been running? At a dead loss of £7 a week for some time, all of which has fallen upon Morris At the Conference the proposal was made it should become a monthly and this we strongly supported But the 'Ballyhooley' section out-voted us and said that if they had the whole conduct of the paper they would make it go So Kitz and Nicoll were elected so ends a five-year record" (June 2nd, 1890, Brit Mus Add MSS 45345)

³ May Morris, II, p 324

⁴ Tom Barclay, *Memoirs and Medleys The Autobiography of a Bottle-Washer*

⁵ May Morris II, p 325

With the Council and the *Commonweal* in the hand of the Anarchist "hobbledehoys", why did Morris not retire directly from the League? Certainly, the Hammersmith Branch were in favour of immediate secession, but remained a few months longer within the League at Morris's request.¹ The reasons were various. The still uncompleted publication of *News from Nowhere* in *Commonweal* was a small one. Again, there was Morris's feeling of loyalty to the provincial remnants, to the comrades at Glasgow, Leicester, Norwich and (for a few weeks more) in Yorkshire. More compelling reasons were to be found in Morris's own self-respect. A main occasion for the split with Hyndman had been the issue of the control of *Justice* by the Council of the S D F. To resign at the moment of losing control of *Commonweal* would have appeared a reversal of his previous principle, an act of personal pique. Again, his very subsidizing of the League and its paper made him sensitive against the accusation that he was refusing to pay the piper because it had ceased to play the tunes for which he had called. And finally there was his natural distaste of looking at failure fully in the face: so many of his hopes had gone into the founding of the League, so much of his best and most sacrificing work had gone to build it in its five and a half years of existence, was it all to end with a final ragged dissension, leaving him with a small personal following meeting in an annexe of his own house at Hammersmith?

For one of the first times in his life, Morris seemed to procrastinate. He dropped out of League activity, he absorbed his attention in other work, he seemed to postpone a decision which he knew to be inevitable. "I have been somewhat worried by matters connected with the League", he wrote to a friend in July, "but somehow or other I don't seem to care much."² In this frame of mind, Morris might have remained a member of the League for many more months if the Anarchists had shown the least desire for compromise. But the degeneration of the League was going on at an astounding rate. An East London and a West-end Anarchist-Communist Group were formed within the

¹ See Morris to Glasier, December 5th, 1890. "The H Branch would have gone out six months ago if it had not been for respect of my sentiments" (Glasier, *op cit*, p. 204).

² Mackail, II, p. 231.

League itself. The "moderate" Anarchists—in the main followers of Prince Kropotkin—were being out-blustered by a curious assortment of cranks, fire-eaters and felons. Malatesta, the stormcock of Anarchism and inheritor of Bakunin's conspiratorial mantle, was back in England and had joined the League. In the wake of the conspirators came the police-spies, sent in in part from genuine alarm at the terrorist complexion of the movement, and in part with the aim of using this handful of political eccentrics to discredit the Socialist movement as a whole in the eyes of the workers.

Anarchism in the late 1880s was no mere parlour philosophy. It shaded down, through various stages, from "leftism" and "anti-parliamentarianism" to the advocacy and practice of crime. The first stage was represented in 1889 and 1890 by such men as James Tochart, a philosophical disciple of Kropotkin. The next by Frank Kitz, who advocated that the main propaganda effort should be directed towards the *lumpen-proletariat* and criminals, with a nostalgic yearning for a movement of the "peasantry" to win back the land. Next came David Nicoll, young John Turner (of the Shop Assistants' Union), George Cores, the Bingham brothers of Sheffield, Charles Mowbray, H. B. Samuels of Leeds—all fire-eaters who advocated "direct" political action—a "NO RENT" campaign, in which a group of Leaguers were to take a house in the East End, barricade the doors, and defy the rent-collector and police until the whole area followed their example, who brooded over conspiratorial history—Cato Street, Brandreth's Derbyshire rising, the Manchester Fenians—and saw "the revolution" in terms of rioting mobs of starving men, guided by a handful of comrades, and whose speeches and writings were inflammatory in the extreme. The great nostrum of all this group was the General Strike, although few of them agreed that they themselves ought to participate in the trade union movement. Next came those who disavowed all organization, and dreamed hazily of isolated actions of violence and terror. And finally those who—in the name of hostility to all bourgeois morality and authority—advocated the "propaganda by deed" or, in plain language, theft and brigandage.

All these noble roads to emancipation were now being openly canvassed within the League. Little over a month after Morris

had lost control of the *Commonweal*, Nicoll was in full swing. The issue of July 12th, 1890, was a real snorter. In his Editorial Nicoll called upon the "No Rent" Campaign to start without delay half a dozen comrades "well barricaded" in a house might hold law and order at bay for weeks. Kitz wrote a long Appeal to Soldiers. Nicoll, in his "Notes", greeted the police strike with the cry, "the whole Governmental machine is going to pieces. Even the practical middle-class man is beginning to ask, 'Are we on the verge of a Revolution?'" The instalment of *News from Nowhere* ("Hampton Court") seemed strangely out of place. Samuels capped the issue by sending in an account of the attack upon the blacklegs in the Leeds gas-strike which invited the attention of the public prosecutor. "If the people had only the knowledge", he wrote, "the whole cursed lot would have been wiped out. As the horses and men picked themselves up, it was seen that many were bruised and bleeding, but, alas! no corpses to be seen." Reluctantly Morris, who as technical owner and publisher of the paper, was liable to all prosecutions, took up his pen to write to Nicoll:

"I have been looking at this week's *Commonweal*, and I must say that I think you are going too far at any rate further than I can follow you. You really must put the curb upon Samuels's blatant folly, or you will *force* me to withdraw all support. I never bargained for this sort of thing when I gave up the editorship.

"I look upon you as a sensible and friendly fellow, and I am sure that you will take this in a friendly spirit as it is meant to you. Please understand that this is meant to be quite private, and do your best not to drive me off. For I do assure you that it would be the greatest grief to me if I had to dissociate myself from men who have been my friends so long and whom I believe to be at bottom thoroughly good fellows."¹

Short of withdrawing, there was little else which he could do.

For a week or two Nicoll was a shade more discreet. But the whole League in London (outside of Hammersmith) was becoming a fanatic's playground. A solemn "Revolutionary Conference" was held at the Autonomie Club on August 3rd, at which four provincial and six London branches of the League were

¹ *Letters*, pp. 324-5. Nicoll later alleged in a pamphlet entitled *The Greenwich Mystery* "*Letters from the Dead*" (1898) that Samuels was a police agent.

represented, together with a dozen high-sounding groups of foreign refugees. The Conference was "most successful". "All red-tapeism and quasi-authoritarianism were banished." The only thing actually decided by the Conference appears to have been the agreement to dispense with a Chairman, or "any such quasi-constitutional official". The aim of the Conference was to secure United International Action in the event of a European Crisis. Mowbray declared that in this event, "he would do his best to get the groups called together for consultation, but as to preliminary steps he should form himself into a committee of one. In the event of a crisis at home, the first thing to do was to fire the slums and get the people into the West-end mansions." Kitz returned to his old nostrum "We should preach to the thieves, the paupers, and the prostitutes". The first act of the Revolution ought to be to open the prison doors." Malatesta delivered himself of a fiery speech, advocating the seizure of property in general. Pearson (Freedom Group) advocated "individual guerrilla warfare. We should recognize individuality." Kent (Sheffield Socialist Society) said "We wanted to know where the gatling guns and other instruments of destruction were kept, so that we might find them when wanted." Miss Lupton "believed in assembling the people in the streets." But she did not go far enough for the delegates. "There must be leaders—(some cries of 'No')—but they must arise when the time came. Leadership was necessary—(renewed dissent)—but we must not plan it." Mrs. Lahr "thought we should do our utmost to get among the soldiers." Nicoll "thought the General Strike meant the Social Revolution. It was not necessary to tell everybody so, all revolutions hitherto had been made by minorities. A General Strike would mean the streets thronged with desperate hungry crowds ready for anything, and that would mean the Revolution." Rarely have any group of hobbledehoyes been condemned so effectively out of their own mouths.¹

Commonweal was now an Anarchist organ. John Sketchley, the old Chartist whose factual studies of capitalism had been a notable feature since 1885, contributed his last article in April, 1890. Glasier contributed one or two light-weight pieces to the end of 1890, and in July and August Morris's lecture on "The

¹ *Commonweal*, August 16th, 1890

Development of Modern Society"¹ was published in instalments. But Morris contributed his last "Notes on News" (which he had written week in, week out, with only a few intervals, for over five years) on July 26th. He was at Kelmscott Manor a good deal in the late summer and early autumn, and (with the exception of *News from Nowhere*, the last instalment of which was published on October 4th) he contributed nothing to the paper during September and October. On November 1st he suddenly vented his spleen upon General Booth and the Salvation Army, in an article entitled "Workhouse Socialism". Two weeks later he sent in his final article—"Where are We Now?"—and the breach was complete.

The break, when it came, was so unadvertised that Glasier, in Glasgow, knew nothing of it for a fortnight. Some final folly of Nicoll's provided the last straw, and "Where are We Now?" was "meant as a 'Farewell' ". "I never wait to be *kicked* down-stairs", Morris wrote to Glasier:

"We have borne with it all a long time, and *at last* have gone somewhat suddenly. For my part I foresaw all this when we allowed the Bloomsbury branch to be expelled. They deserved it, for it was that pig of a Donald who began it all, but they being out, it was certain that the Anarchists would get the upper hand.

"Personally, I must tell you that I feel twice the man since I have spoken out. I dread a quarrel above all things, and I have had this one on my mind for a year or more. But I am glad it is over at last, for in good truth I would almost as soon join a White Rose Society as an Anarchist one, such nonsense as I deem the latter.

"Good-bye, and don't be downcast, because we have been driven to admit plain facts. It has been the curse of our movement that we would lie to ourselves about our progress and victories." ²

Just over a month before Morris had given an interview to *Cassell's Saturday Journal*, in which he said nothing of disagreements with his comrades, but was at particular pains to emphasize his own debt to Marx, and to put himself within the Marxist tradition (see p. 889). At the same time his attitude to the

¹ This lecture, with its emphasis on the break-up of feudalism and the early growth of capitalism, may well have been inspired by a desire to make even clearer his objections to Webb's historical outlook as revealed in the *Fabian Essays*.

² Glasier, *op cit*, pp. 203-5.

S D F was more than usually conciliatory¹ But, when Hyndman wrote to invite him to contribute once again to *Justice*, he met with a friendly refusal "I have come to the conclusion that no form of journalism is suited to me I want to pull myself together after what has been, to me at least, a defeat"² With Glasier, it is true, he discussed the possibility of a *general* Socialist paper, embracing all sections but it was a prospect far removed in the future "For the rest", he concluded, "speaking and lecturing as much as sickened human nature can bear are the only things as far as I can see"³

The Hammersmith Branch was only too ready to accept Morris's lead In October it had registered an official protest at an article of Nicoll's on the (imaginary) "No Rent" movement, in which he had advocated the defence of his (imaginary) house by five resolute comrades with "bricks, stones, and hot water"⁴ Pursuant to this resolution it had appointed a deputation to meet the League Council, and its unsatisfactory reception provided the actual occasion of the breach⁵ On November 21st, the Branch officially severed its connection with the League, and was renamed the "Hammersmith Socialist Society", with Emery Walker as Secretary The North Kensington Branch seceded in the following week⁶ A letter of explanation was sent out to all remaining branches and groups (Glasgow, Oxford, Manchester, Norwich, Leicester and Yarmouth in the provinces, and East London, North London, Streatham and the "Commonweal Group" in London), declaring the intention of the Branch to carry on its propaganda independently, since—had they remained within an Anarchist-dominated League—"a great part of our time, which

¹ Morris was questioned about the Split, and replied "That is because we have strong convictions We split because we are earnest and really alive There are two main sources of dispute We cannot quite agree as to what is likely to be the precise social system of the future, and we cannot agree as to the best means of attaining it But these are matters which will work themselves out as we go along" (*Cassell's Saturday Journal*, October 18th, 1890)

² Hyndman, *Record of an Adventurous Life*, p 361

³ Morris to Glasier, December 16th, 1890 (Glasier, *op cit*, p 206)

⁴ *Commonweal*, October 18th, 1890, Hammersmith Minutes, October 24th, 1890

⁵ Hammersmith Minutes, October 31st and November 7th, 1890

⁶ *Ibid*, December 5th, 1890

should be spent in attacking Capitalism, would have to be spent in bickering with our own comrades".¹

The Hammersmith Branch, in the summer of 1890, was 120 strong—and yet Morris thought it might well be "as numerous as all the rest of the League"² If these figures are correct, then the League had sunk in 1890 *below* its membership at the time of the First Annual Conference in 1885 (see p 488) Morris had reason to wonder, "Where are We Now?"

VIII "Where are We Now?"

The seeds of dissolution had been within the League from its very birth. Hyndman's opportunism and arbitrary methods had provoked their opposites in Morris's purism and inattention to party discipline "It was partly Morris's fault that the Anarchists gradually won the upper hand in the Socialist League", Andreas Scheu, who had come back into activity in 1889 and 1890, wrote many years later

"He was too good-natured and too tolerant towards his opponents His indulgence was often painful to witness, and was bound to lead to a complete break, since his manner drove away the more serious elements, and opened the door to all sorts of doubtful characters"³

The comment is entirely just The S D F—for all Hyndman's many failings, had a definite leadership, discipline of a sort, and engaged in clearly defined political campaigns Morris was not a successful political leader He took too much upon himself, and was unable to develop a responsible core of united leadership around him His experiences in the S.D F and his own temperamental dislike of bickering and intrigue led him to appease the Anarchists until the whole fabric of the League had become rotten He allowed the League to become totally dependent upon himself financially, and then was unable to refuse each additional

¹ Published in full in Mackail, II, pp 239-40 List of branches in Hammersmith papers

² Glasier, *op cit*, p 204 The annual report of the Hammersmith Branch, in the summer of 1890, reported a membership of 120, nearly double that of the previous year, and attributed this rate of recruiting to the vigorous open-air propaganda, at which an average of audience of 300 had been built up (Hammersmith papers)

³ Scheu, *op cit*, Part III, Ch V

demand for a subsidy, for fear he should seem to be tying policy to his purse-strings. The failure of the League was at least in part *Morris's* failure.

A good deal of this *Morris* understood at the end of 1890, and he came to understand more before he died. He did not make the mistake of confusing his own grievous personal setback with a defeat for the movement as a whole. Indeed, the remarkable thing about his "Farewell" article for *Commonweal* is the degree to which he was able to stand outside of the affairs of the League, and judge his own endeavours in an impersonal light, "Men absorbed in a movement", he commenced his article, "are apt to surround themselves with a kind of artificial atmosphere which distorts the proportions of things outside, and prevents them from seeing what is really going on." By contrast, he sought to look round and note the way the movement was affecting the people as a whole.

First, he looked back down the seven years since "Socialism came to life again in this country" "Few movements surely have made so much progress during this short time as Socialism has done"

"What was it which we set out to accomplish? To change the system of society on which the stupendous fabric of civilization is founded, and which has been built up by centuries of conflict with older and dying systems, and crowned by the victory of modern civilization over the material surroundings of life

"Could seven years make any visible impression on such a tremendous undertaking as this?"

The pioneers themselves were little more than a "band of oddities" (see p 346)

"Who were the statesmen who took up the momentous questions laid before England of the nineteenth century by the English Socialists? Who were the great divines who preached this new gospel of happiness from their pulpits? Who were the natural philosophers who proclaimed their hope and joy at the advent of a society which should at last use their marvellous discoveries for the good of mankind?"

"There is no need to take pen in hand to write their names "

And yet, despite the smallness and oddity of the band, the pioneers had succeeded in impressing "the idea of Socialism deeply on the epoch . . . The shouts of triumph over the glories of

civilization which once drowned the moans of the miserable have now sunk into quavering apologies for the existence of the horrors and fatuities of our system " This impression had been made, despite all the failings of the Socialists themselves

"We have between us made about as many mistakes as any other party in a similar space of time Quarrels more than enough we have had; and sometimes weak assent for fear of quarrels to what we did not agree with

"There has been self-seeking amongst us, and vainglory, and sloth, and rashness, though there has been at least courage and devotion also When I first joined the movement I hoped that some working-man leader, or rather leaders, would turn up, who would push aside all middle-class help, and become great historical figures I might still hope for that, if it seemed likely to happen, for indeed I long for it enough, but to speak plainly it does not so seem at present "

Yet, despite all this, the very decay of capitalist society had prepared the soil for their propaganda, and helped it to bear fruit

Next, he turned to analyse his feelings of disappointment as to the general tendency of the movement

"When we first began to work together, there was little said about anything save the great ideals of Socialism, and so far off did we seem from the realization of these, that we could hardly think of any means for their realization, save great dramatic events which would make our lives tragic indeed, but would take us out of the sordidness of the so-called 'peace' of civilization With the great extension of Socialism, this also is changed Our very success has dimmed the great ideals that first led us on, for the hope of the partial and, so to say, vulgarised realization of Socialism is now pressing on us "

Discussion within the movement now turned less on ends, and more and more upon differences of method Two methods he singled out for criticism first, the anarchist bluster of riot and partial revolt, which he dismissed in a few words second, "our old acquaintance palliation, elevated now into vastly greater importance than it used to have, because of the growing discontent, and the obvious advance of Socialism" This second tendency he discussed in more detail

"The whole set [of] opinion amongst those more or less touched by Socialism is towards the New Trades' Unions and palliation Men believe that they can wrest from the capitalists some portion of their privileged profits That [this] could only very partially be done,

and that the men could not rest there if it were done, we Socialists know very well ”

In the end, thought Morris, the legal Eight Hours' Day might be won, but would bring “next to no results either to men or masters” “No permanent material benefit *can* accrue to [the workers] until Socialism has ceased to be militant, and is merged in the new society”

“For the rest, I neither believe in State Socialism as desirable in itself, or, indeed, as a complete scheme do I think it possible. Nevertheless some approach to it is sure to be tried, and to my mind this will precede any complete enlightenment on the new order of things. The success of Mr Bellamy's book, deadly dull as it is, is a straw to show which way the wind blows. The general attention paid to our clever friends, the Fabian lecturers and pamphleteers, is not altogether due to their literary ability, people have really got their heads turned more or less in their direction ”

All these signs, it seemed to Morris—the growing discontent, the great strikes, the stirring of new ideas—pointed in the same direction

“This time when people are excited about Socialism, and when many who know nothing about it think themselves Socialists, is the time of all others to put forward the simple principles of Socialism regardless of the policy of the passing hour

“ In saying this I am speaking for those who are complete Socialists—or let us call them Communists. I say for us *to make Socialists is the business at present* .”

While the new unionists, and (with an eye on Samuels & Co) “disturbance-breeders”, might do some good from which the movement would benefit, “we need not and cannot work heartily with them when we know their methods are beside the right way”

“Our business, I repeat, is the making of Socialists, i e convincing people that Socialism is good for them and is possible. When we have enough people of that way of thinking, *they* will find out what action is necessary for putting their principles in practice. Until we have that mass of opinion, action for a general change that will benefit the whole people is *impossible*. Have we that body of opinion or anything like it? Surely not. Though there are a great many who believe it possible to compel their masters to behave better to them, and though they are prepared to compel them all but a very small minority are not prepared *to do without masters*. They do not believe in their own capacity

to undertake the management of affairs, and to be responsible for their life in this world. When they are so prepared, then Socialism will be realized, but nothing can push it on a day in advance of that time.

"Therefore, I say, make Socialists. We Socialists can do nothing else that is useful, and preaching and teaching is not out of date for that purpose, but rather for those who, like myself, do not believe in State Socialism, it is the only rational means of attaining to the New Order of Things"¹

In truth, between 1889 and 1892 Morris was both discouraged and bewildered at the turn the movement was taking, despite all his enthusiasm at the spirit of the unskilled themselves, and this final article shows him at his lowest ebb of confidence. Unspoken, but behind the article all the time, is the devastating comment which he made to Bruce Glasier in a letter of October, 1890.

"As to League affairs, I have really been a good bit out of them. I don't think there is much life in it anywhere except at our Branch. The whole movement has taken the turn which might have been expected, towards unideal & humdrum 'gradual improvement', i.e. towards general deadlock and break-up. That's all right but of course it goes slow, and meantime I sometimes rather feel sick of things in general. The humbug which floats to the top in all 'branches of intelligence' is such a damned greasy pot of scum"²

Here Morris's real feelings are given open expression. On every side of him, he could see "Fabianism" gaining ground, which could only lead (as he thought) to a "State Socialism" on the models framed by Annie Besant and Edward Bellamy—a bureaucratic extension of Fabian "municipal Socialism", without any fundamental change in social relationships. "An article in the *Star* the other day carried the 'We are all Socialists now' about as far as that stale piece of cant could be carried", he burst out in his *Commonweal* "Notes" in February, 1890.

"'We have had municipal Socialism for fifty years', said its writer. Have we indeed? It must be a valuable article, then, considering how it has abolished all the evils of which Labour has to complain! Whereabouts is this municipal Socialism? I should like to find out. I think it must be Socialism for the rich, that is the reason why we cannot find it out."³

¹ *Commonweal*, November 15th, 1890

² *Letters*, p. 328. Glasier excised this passage from his published version (*Glasier, op cit*, p. 203)

³ *Commonweal*, February 1st, 1890

He opposed the Fabian policy not only because its methods of parliamentary intrigue and middle-class permeation offended his temperament ("unideal & humdrum"), but because he saw it as no more than a lengthy and discouraging *détour*, coming in the end to "general deadlock and break-up", and leaving the serious assault upon Capitalism still unattempted "That's all right"—in the end, Morris knew, the workers would discover their error, and turn their faces down the revolutionary road, but he could not repress his impatience and discouragement that this process must be gone through during the remaining years of his own life.

In one sense, Morris had a prophetic insight into the character of the emergent theory of twentieth-century Social-Democracy. The pioneers of the 1880s had had a wide influence, but they had failed to achieve the objective which Engels had set in 1883—that of forming a nucleus of theoretically advanced Socialists who would succeed in mastering the mass movement when it arose. But, deep as was his insight into the character of Fabianism, his conclusions in "Where are We Now?" pointed towards an aggravation of the disease rather than a cure "This is the time of all others to put forward the simple principles of Socialism *regardless of the policy of the passing hour*"—the tone of this implies an independent propaganda of pure Socialism *outside* the mass labour movement, rather than a propaganda of both theory and practice within the workers' own organizations. Engels's advice throughout these years was different in emphasis: he urged the Socialists (in Lenin's words) to carry on their activities "*right in the heart of the proletarian masses*", to "throw off their narrow sectarianism *at all costs* and *affiliate* to the labour movement in order *politically to shake up* the proletariat." Morris's attitude to the first May Day is symbolic of his confusion at this time. He was still placing far too much emphasis upon the inculcation of Socialist theory in the abstract, far too little upon the educative role of the struggle itself. Engels, by contrast, stressed repeatedly the importance of practical experience. He and Marx (he wrote in 1888)

"entirely trusted to the intellectual development of the working class, which was sure to result from combined action and mutual discussion. The very events and vicissitudes of the struggle against capital, the defeats even more than the victories, could not help bringing home to

men's minds the insufficiency of their various favourite nostrums, and preparing the way for a more complete insight into the true conditions of working class emancipation"¹

In January, 1890, writing of the English and American workers, he was even more specific

" they go their own way. One cannot drum the theory into them beforehand, but their own experience and their own blunders and the evil consequences of them will soon bump their noses up against theory—and then all right"²

Morris cannot be accused, like Hyndman, of having reduced Marxism to a series of narrow texts and dogmas. But in other respects his attitude at this time falls under Engels's criticism. To "make Socialists" while holding aloof from the New Unionism was simply a policy of self-destruction. If reformism was to be fought, the place to fight it must be within the people's mass organizations. It is true that Morris was not able to participate in this action himself. But this is irrelevant. As a Socialist leader, advocating a definite line of policy, he was at fault.

The source of Morris's strength and inspiration was at the same time a cause of his political weakness. The depth of his hatred against capitalism made him inclined to denounce all partial reforms as compromises or betrayals. The clarity of his vision of Socialist society made him impatient of any advances which savoured of the re-organization or "improvement" of capitalism. Above all, he feared the penetration of the Socialist movement by the values and outlook of the middle class. Engels had pointed to this problem when writing to Sorge in December, 1889

" . . . The most repulsive thing here is the bourgeois 'respectability' which has grown deep into the bones of the workers. I am not at all sure for instance, that John Burns is not secretly prouder of his popularity with Cardinal Manning, the Lord Mayor and the bourgeoisie in general than of his popularity with his own class. And Champion has intrigued for years with bourgeois and especially conservative elements. Even Tom Mann, whom I regard as the finest of them, is fond of mentioning that he will be lunching with the Lord Mayor. If one compares this with the French, one can see what a revolution is good for after all."³

¹ Preface to the 1888 edition of Samuel Moore's translation of the *Communist Manifesto*

² Engels to H. Schluter, January 11th, 1890, *Marx-Engels Sel. Cor.*, p. 464

³ *Ibid.*, p. 461

Morris, also, was ever sensitive to this oppressive climate of Victorian "respectability" He knew better than any English Socialist the reservations and mingled motives with which middle-class reformers attempted to bring the working-class movement under their influence. He well understood that after the Dock Strike great efforts were being made by such men as Cardinal Manning and A J Mundella to woo the labour movement from a revolutionary course, and he estimated quite correctly the part which the Fabians were—consciously or unconsciously—playing in the process. All these circumstances, combined with a growing awareness of the character of imperialism, gave him at times a prophetic insight into the hypocrisy and self-seeking, betrayal and opportunism, which might bewilder and corrupt the labour movement of the future

This—and this only—was the reason why he urged, again and again during the years of the League, the necessity for "making Socialists" It was not through some desire to hold aloof from the struggle, or to rest in a world of beautiful impracticable idealism His advice sprang directly from the need which he saw ever before him, to build a nucleus of "convinced Socialists", a tradition of revolutionary Socialist theory, which might either master the movement or survive the errors of reformism into a future revolutionary phase of the movement Certainly Engels was right that the *real* way to make Socialists and win theoretical clarity was for the existing Socialists to carry on the struggle within the labour movement itself But Morris's purism should not be confused with preciousness In the last years of his life, when he had broken with the League, he was to show himself still capable of further "education"—ridding himself of many of his errors, while never abandoning for a moment the fight against Fabianism And at the same time he was to become increasingly preoccupied with the problem which Engels, too, regarded as central the creation of unity within the movement, and the building of a united Socialist Party