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The Coming Revolution

Charlotte Wilson

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We are living on the eve of great events. Before the end of this century has come we shall see great revolutionary movements breaking up our social conditions in Europe and probably also in the United States of America.

Social storms cannot be forecast with the same accuracy as those which cross the Atlantic on their way to our shores. But still, there are tokens permitting us to predict the approach of those great disturbances which periodically visit mankind to redress wrongs accumulated by past centuries, to freshen the atmosphere, to blow away monopolies and prejudices.

There is a certain periodicity in these great uprisings of the oppressed. The end of each of the last five centuries has been marked by great movements which have helped Freedom to gain ground in France, in England, in the Netherlands, in Switzerland and in Bohemia. The great German historian of our century, Gervinus, saw in this periodicity a law; while the Italian patriot and philosopher Ferrari, devoting special attention to the phenomena of evolution and revolution, tried to explain its causes. Explained, or not, it has been a fact for five centuries past.

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No doubt our century will be no exception to the rule. It is sufficient to look around us, to observe. All those facts which foreshadowed the approach of revolutions in times past, cannot but strike the unprejudiced observer.

The commercial crisis grows worse and worse. Millions of workmen, driven away from the country to the ever-growing cities, are wandering about without work. We boast of our gigantic cities, and unheard-of misery grows up in those centers where all the wealth of the world is spent in an unhealthy luxury, amid the rags and destitution of the poor.

Nowhere, in no quarter, any prospect of improvement. The crisis *must* grow worse. Having its cause in the circumstance that those who produce wealth cannot purchase it; that customers must be sought elsewhere than amid the producers; that for all such customers in India, in Africa, and everywhere else there are two or three competitors-the crisis cannot be only a temporary one. Some great modification of our system of production must be made, and it must be made at once: the sufferers will wait no longer; they cannot.

The political institutions in which so much faith was put half a century ago, have proved a failure. The huge machinery of the State satisfies nobody and faith in Parliamentary rule, in suffrage, be it limited or universal, is disappearing. Even the democratic institutions of the United States have proved a worse failure than all those of Europe.

"A new departure must be made," - such is the general outcry.

Meantime a new social force has grown up in our midst-the workman, the producer of wealth. A mere increase of wages, a mere reduction of hours, is no longer the sole demand of the workmen of Europe. They go farther. They perceive how small their share of the immense wealth they have produced of late; how unprotected they are- even the happiest of them-in the ups and downs of our industry; how dependent they are on forces beyond their control, that is, on the needs of customers

far away. And they want to produce for themselves the wealth they can produce with the perfected machinery of our times.

Every day increases their longing for equality. The wealth they produce, the higher enjoyments of science and art which now they guarantee to a few-they wish to enjoy these for themselves. They wish no longer to send their children of fifteen or thirteen to the mines, nor see them becoming servants to machines-machines themselves.

And in proportion as the longing for Equality and Freedom grows; in proportion as the workman, becoming more closely acquainted with the rich, perceives that they are made of the same bones, muscles, nerves, and brains as himself; in proportion as the daily press makes him acquainted with the mean passions, the narrow views, and the vices of his rulers, respect for the Great Unknown-the Government dies away; the last force which kept our decaying institutions standing, veneration, disappears. The gray wig of the lawyer becomes as little impressive as the coronet of the peer and the speech of the Prime Minister.

The spirit of revolt spreads in the masses. The most insignificant circumstance becomes the cause of an outbreak. This has always been -the case on the eve of revolutions. A childish game becomes a disturbance, leading to bloodshed; an interference of the police, an armed conflict; meetings become riots, and strikes lead to civil war.

Take all these facts together, analyze their mutual action, and if you know what nations have been on the eve of revolutions, -you -will doubt no longer the close approach of the Revolution of the nineteenth century. But few years will elapse before Governments will be overthrown on the Continent. Already in 1848 the insurrection in Italy spread all over the Continent, barricades in Paris were immediately repeated in the barricades at Vienna and Berlin. Now that Europe is so closely connected by steam and electricity; now that the same ideas inspire the Norwegian workman and the Italian peasant,

the. rapid spread of the revolution is yet more inevitable. Governments will be overthrown. Republics and Communes will be proclaimed. And upon these Republics and Communes the masses will impose the modification of the present system of production and political organization on new principles.

Spanish and Russian, German and French, Belgian and Italian peasants will seize the soil of which they have been despoiled. Workmen in towns will seize factories and mills. Acts of expropriation will take place. New forms of life will be submitted to a trial; new departures will be made in the industrial and political life of societies.

Successful or partially unsuccessful-all revolutions have succeeded in a measure. The Bourbons returned to France, but the feudal institutions did not return with them nor the absolute rule of the king. Partially defeated or not, the coming revolution will give, as it has always given, the watchword to the evolution of the next century.

Will England remain untouched by this movement? The middle of England have the reputation of being far-sighted enough to make the necessary concessions in time: will they be able to do this again?

Forty years ago they could say to the workmen in revolt: Be our political equals, and in the industrial field let us go hand in hand to the conquest of the world-market. The situation is no longer the same, nor the points at issue. The promise of continually enriching the

by manufacturing for other people than the workers themselves country been kept. Were it again repeated, it would be out of date. So also with representative government. The points of contest also are not the same. As long as Germany and France revolted to gain what was already realized in England, French and German revolutions could have no hold on English minds. But the German and French workmen go farther now. They ask economic equality, they ask for new forms of economic life; their insurrection will be for Socialism, not for political

representation; and the ideas of the Continental workmen will find a living echo in England.

Are the English middle classes prepared to take the lead in the new movement, as they did in that for Parliamentary reform? Are their ears aware of the new tendencies? Do they recognize their justice? No. And the waves of the European revolution will no longer break against the cliffs of England: they will sweep some of them away.

It is no use to sneer, and cry "Why these revolutions?" No use for sailor to scorn the cyclone and to cry "Why should it approach my ship?" The gale has originated in times past, in remote regions. Cold mist and hot air have been struggling long before the great rupture of equilibrium-the gale was born.

So it is with social gales also. Centuries of injustice, ages of oppression and misery, ages of disdain of the subject and poor, have prepared the storm.

We, a handful of men who see the gale coming, and warn the careless, and are pelted with stones for that warning,-we are as unable to prevent the storm as to accelerate its arrival. Its first coming will depend on causes greater than those we take hold of. But we may, and must, show its real causes. We must endeavor to discover and to enunciate in plain words the hopes, the faint, indistinct ideal which

sets the masses in motion. The better understood, the more warmly taken to heart, the greater will be the results achieved, and the less numerous the useless victims.

These hopes are hopes of getting rid of capitalist oppression, of abolishing the rule of man by man, of Equality, of Freedom, of Anarchy. And those who fight for these tendencies-deeply rooted in, and cherished by, Humanity-will win in the struggle! Without these principles no society is possible.