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The Awakening Starvelings

Alexander Berkman

c. 1930?

Ideas are true liberators. Ideas as distinguished from so-called reason. For in our work-a-day world there is much reason and too little thought. It is given only to the seer and poet to conceive liberating ideas – impractical, wild thoughts that ultimately light the way of practical, blind man to better and higher endeavor.

To “practical” minds the regeneration of the world is an empty dream. To transform the cold winter of our age into the warmth of a beautiful summer day, to change our valley of tears and misery into a luxurious garden of joy is a vain fantasy lacking reason and sanity. But a William Morris sees in his mind’s eye a world of comradeship and brotherhood rejoicing in the plenitude of earth’s bounty, and he challenges “practical reason” to justify the existence of poverty and antagonism in a society over-rich in all the physical and aesthetic joys of a full human life.

The incisive genius of a Leonid Andreyev, with a bitter scorn born of intense love, lashes the exasperating helplessness of the great giant of labor, strong enough to support the whole world, yet too weak in spirit and thought to tear to pieces the flimsy network woven about him by the pygmies vampiring on his great body.

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How pathetic the helplessness of the giant, mighty in everything save liberating thought!

Ah, indeed, thoughts are not vain fantasies, ideas not an empty dream. Look about you. On every side is being enacted the terrible tragedy of Andreyev's "King Hunger". Labor feeds and clothes the world, while himself, poor Starveling, goes cold and hungry. The Masters of Life tremble in their palaces at the first rumor of their disaffected slaves. Their anxious ear catches the low murmur beneath their feet, the ominous rumbling down in the cellar of life; their faces blanch, and laughter is hushed in the mansions; the temples of Bachanalian joy are deserted, and the bright chandeliers turned low, for fear the starvelings might see the light ... and find their way to the palaces.

And the Starvelings? They meekly crawl before the trembling masters, the powerful judges by grace of King Hunger, and plead mercy for stealing a five-pound loaf of bread. But the mighty judges know no mercy. The Starvelings are doomed to death. In despair they call to King Hunger, "Help us! Tell us what to do!"

"Revolt" replies Hunger. "Take what is yours".

But how? In the council of the assembled Starvelings, conspiring plans of revolt, there is even greater poverty of thought and liberating ideas than of worldly goods. Ah, the helplessness of the stomach, conscious only of its hunger!

Meek in spirit, poor in thought, the Starvelings again appeal to King Hunger for advice. But he is perfidious, serving with equal impartiality master and slave, ultimately deceiving both. For the despair of Hunger may flame forth in bloody revolt, but it needs the inspiration of the liberating idea to become conscious, triumphant revolution.

Revolts of hunger, inevitable as they often are, are failures in the larger social sense. But revolutions inspired by a liberating idea have always been successful to the degree of their inspiration. And the world progresses. Modern labor is learning the lessons of its past struggles. It is no longer satisfied with the crumbs thrown at it from the masters' heavy-laden tables. It voices its demand, ever more loudly and determinedly, for its full share of life. Over geographical boundaries marches the uprising of the Starvelings. It breaks down national lines, barriers of religion and caste, and sweeps the world with the revolt of the international proletariat. In far China, India and Egypt the coolie is awakening to the new spirit and defying the traditions of centuries. The industrial serfs are challenging their hereditary lords to combat. Throughout the world is to be sensed the coming storm. It is no more the revolt of the Starvelings, blindly following King Hunger. It is Revolution, conscious of brotherhood and solidaric unity.