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The End Set Before Us

Charlotte Wilson

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When the approach of serious revolutionary movements is generally felt, it is very difficult to hold back from trying to raise a corner of the veil which conceals the future,—from trying to foresee what may be the possible issue of the approaching disturbances. Of course, historical forecasts as a rule are exceedingly difficult. We know that the keenest minds who lived, in times past, on the eve of great revolutions, failed to foresee the probable issues of the coming events. Some of their predictions went too far; but some others were rapidly distanced by the revolution. It must be avowed, however, that those forecasts were too often mere expressions of the personal wishes of the prophets; and that they very seldom had the character of really scientific predictions.

These last are always conditional, because science can do no more than to show that, if such and such conditions prevail, their consequences will be so and so.

If we proceed in this way, and analyze the movement which we see growing round about us, and try to divine its probable outcome, we must say—with great regret—that if the Socialist movement continues on the same lines as it goes on now; if no new ideas as to its real aims and possible sphere of action are brought forward, and

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spread among the toilers of the soil and workshop—its results will be disappointing to those who expect from it a thorough modification of the present conditions of labor.

But, if the danger is perceived; if those who will not fail to perceive it succeed in attracting public attention on this point, both during the movement and before it begins; if their warnings are understood and penetrate the masses—then the next movement really *will* result in a deep modification of the present economical conditions, and will be a new departure in economical life, opening a new field for a further development of humanity.

Let us explain our idea. In a preceding article we have insisted upon the necessity of *local action* for solving the great economical problems which have grown ripe during the present century; and we have pointed out that, if in a given country the workmen place their hopes on an elected body of representatives—however honest and earnest the elected—and wait from this body the great economical revolution which has become a necessity; instead of proceeding themselves, in each separate locality, to the immediate transformation of the present economical conditions; if they expect some national reform and forget that each locality must proceed by its own example first, to induce the backward parts of the nation to follow suit; then the movement will be a failure. It will not realize one-hundredth of the hopes now set upon it. It will soon discourage the masses, and open the way to the bloody reaction of the White Terror.

Thus, taking this country, we may safely say that there is one idea quite ripe amid the millions—namely, the idea that some modification of the landed property must be made.

Go to any workmen's meeting, be it convoked by Tories, or Whigs, Radicals or Socialists, and listen to the speakers. Let them speak what they like. They may be supported by the audience or not, but let them, however incidentally, touch the land-question and attack the great landowners,—and immediately a storm of applause will break out in the audience. Go to a meeting of Londoners,

and denounce there the owners of the soil of the metropolis; go to the miners and denounce the mining royalties,—and you are sure of finding an echo, however mixed the audience.

Discontent is ripe against the landlords: no doubt of it. To that fact our political stars, fixed or shooting, are indebted for their popularity. To it many a chatterbox is indebted for having the ear of the people. "*Something* must be done to shake the power of the landed aristocracy"—such is now the current opinion in this country.

But, what does this "something," mean?

For more than fifty years the middle-classes of this country have carried on a regular, sustained, and very well conducted campaign against the privileges of the landed aristocracy. Thousands of speeches were pronounced, millions of pamphlets, tracts, and books, were distributed in order to raise discontent against the privileges of the present landowners. The movement was started by the Radical middle classes, and for fifty years the middle classes have taken a prominent part in the maintenance and leadership of the movement. Recently it has won the support of Socialists and rallied even the moderate Liberals.

We are the first to rejoice when we see that such unanimity exists against, at least, one monopoly—the monopoly of land. But we ask further: What is advocated as a means of getting rid of this monopoly?

We have heard much of late about the nationalization of land. The word "nationalization" has become quite popular; but we are still at a loss to discover what is the average meaning attached to it. And the more we try to discover it the less we find at the bottom of this now popular watchword.

Does it mean the State ownership of land as it exists—or rather, as it existed until last year—in the case of nearly two-thirds of European Russia, where the State owns the land and lets it to peasant-communities for a relatively low rent, but ruins them at the same time by taxation, so as to force the peasants to abandon their land and to go to the cities in search of labor?

Or, again, is it the United States' system, where the land was owned by the State but has been sold (it might have been rented as well) to land-grabbers, among whom several English lords occupy so prominent a place?

Is it that the State would rent the land to middle-class farmers whose former robberies—the orthodox economists call it thrift—permit them to buy machines and make those improvements in culture which are absolutely inaccessible for the owner of three acres if his whole fortune consists of a half-crown spade?

If all those who describe themselves as members of "Land Nationalization" and "Land Restoration" Leagues were convoked to a Congress, not only should we hear the most discordant opinions—the same would be true of any party in progress of development—but we are much afraid that we should see at the bottom of all these rival schemes nothing but a means of giving up the land into the hands of the middle-classes, of creating a landed plutocracy in lieu of the landed and nothing more.

In our opinion, the hearty support now given by the middle-classes to the land agitation means only that each manufacturer of turnip-marmalade wishes to have his own castle, and his own hunting-grounds, and that each retired butcher is anxious to partake also of the "unearned increment" of the yearly increasing value of land. "Free trade in land," this watchword of the Financial Reform Association, is at the bottom of the agitation, however sincerely inspired with a wish for more serious changes, may be those Socialist workmen who gather under the banners of the various Land Reform Leagues.

And now we ask ourselves, What are likely to be the results of a like movement if we enter the next revolutionary period without any clearer idea about what is to be done with land, and if, moreover, representatives who have no clearer ideas about it than the masses themselves be entrusted to carry out the reform by laws?

If it is taken into account that Socialist representatives *will* be mixed in any revolutionary Parliament with twice or thrice as

many people eager to maintain the old state of things; and if the unavoidable limitations are considered which any advanced program meets with when the attempt is made to bring it into practice.

If new ideas as to what is to be done with land are not brought into circulation and spread during the few years which separate us now from the next revolution.

If the idea does not grow that in each locality people *will be compelled* to know *themselves* beforehand what they wish and what they must try to realize; and if they are not prepared themselves to take the initiative in its practical realization without caring about what may be the tortoise-work of a national Parliament.

If such conditions prevail, and nothing is done to change them.

Then the immense amount of latent forces now alive amid the workmen will be spent for no better purpose than the creation of a new landed gentry composed of the middle-classes, which gentry, thanks to the capital it disposes of, will add a new field for the exploitation of the workmen to those of which it is already in possession, the wide field of the machine-agriculture, like that of the Bonanza farms.

Then the forces and most probably the blood of the workmen will be spent again in increasing the powers of their exploiters.

But, we hope, it will not be so. More definite views as to the issues and duties of the coming movement will spring up, and they will be echoed by the oppressed. We, at least, shall do all that in us lies to bring about that result.