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“No Rent” in Sheffield

John Creaghe

July 1891

We refer elsewhere to Comrade Creaghe’s plucky assault upon the landlord robbers. As some of our readers may like to know what he has to say for himself, we quote the following from the first issue of our bright little contemporary, the Sheffield Anarchist, to which we wish all success.

Comrades,

As I find we are now boycotted by the Sheffield Telegraph, which, no doubt, while it silences us, will continue, with its usual sense of fair play, to attack us in its columns, I write to you for the satisfaction of the only public we respect, namely, the workers.

I have been held up to the reprobation of the rich thieves as a man who acts dishonourably by breaking what they call his “contracts.” I shall now show, for the satisfaction and education of the workers, too long accustomed to take their morality from their masters, how little these so-called contracts should bind the poor. As everyone knows there are certain conditions under which a contract is binding, and there are others under which the contract, however binding when made, cannot be fulfilled by one of the parties to it, who is then blameless owing to these new conditions.

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That a contract should be binding, it is necessary before all things that both parties should be free; at least one of them should not be limited in his freedom by the other. This is clear to everyone, or ought to be, and is clear enough to any one of our pastors or masters when compelled by a brave burglar or highwayman to make a contract of transference of his goods with a pistol to his ear. He breaks this contract as soon as he can, not admitting for a moment that it is valid; and the poor man ought to do exactly the same in his contracts with the rich plunderer. Not alone that, but the poor man has much greater reason for breaking his contract with the rich than the man has in breaking it with the highwayman; for when a poor man takes a house or gets goods on credit, he only enters into a contract to pay for that which has been stolen from him, that which he has already paid for with the only coin that pays for anything in truth and justice his services to the community in the form of labour, it matters not what form of labour it may be. He has paid for his share of the wealth of the community, not once but a thousand times over, if he be a working man.

But this is not all. It is well understood by the rent-monger that when he lets a house to a poor working man, that he cannot possibly pay rent when he is out of work and gets no wages; so that in justice, even if you admit the right to plunder in the form of rent, it is really one of the conditions of the contract, though unexpressed, that the poor worker shall not be bound by it when he no longer receives wages. Let it be remembered at the same time that the causes which leave men out of employment are, in the great majority of cases, quite out of the control of the workers.

In my case, comrades, as well as in that of the productive worker, the house was taken on the condition, though unexpressed, that if I succeeded in my practice I would pay. And this I certainly would have done before being obliged to break up my establishment. I would have paid for my own sake, because I knew they had the power to injure me for not so doing, as they have done; but let me be understood, that I would not pay in the belief

summons followed for which I was prepared, and I had made up my mind to attend in order to make propaganda, when on the night previous, Brackenbury's father being much interested in the affair, came to the Club and soon persuaded us that by not attending our enemies would be much more embarrassed than if I did, and so it turned out, as you have seen by the newspaper report which we sent you. I had that day sent a letter to the Sheffield Telegraph, an extract from which was read in Court and published as you have seen.

The affair has made much stir, and has troubled property owners not a little, and the Property Owners Association has called a meeting for the 2nd of July. On the other hand we are trying to get up an Anti-Property Association, the object of which is to encourage every attack against property and law, by assuring support to the families of men who go to jail for resistance to property and its support, authority. You will find notice of it in our paper the *Sheffield Anarchist*, the first number of which appeared last week.

We have had a very fair sale of it at our first meeting at the Monolith. We had a splendid meeting, most attentive and enthusiastic. We have still another meeting to come as I write.

This was the day fixed for our Conference here, which was well attended by Sheffield comrades, though very few from other places turned up. At the Monolith Comrade Purcell from Derby spoke very eloquently, and was much applauded. He is, however, unfortunately not with us altogether upon the religious question, but he is very liberal in his views of it.

In conclusion let me say that there is a fine spirit growing up here which some day will take form in real rebellious action.

With revolutionary greetings,

J. Creaghe

landlady sent the bums, but they retired without more than threats; but about a fortnight after a big fat bum came alone into the shop, asked to see me, demanded rent, and on my refusal told me he was going to take my furniture, so I ordered him out, and on his refusal threatened him with the poker, and finally with the help of Comrade Brackenbury bundled him out, and applied a few whacks to him with the poker outside, as he attempted to use his stick.

We closed the door and laughed at him through the windows, but we did not know what was coming, and soon the laugh was against us, for as soon as a policeman appeared on the scene, the bum flung himself against one of the side doors, which was very frail, and burst in, followed by the policeman. The poker had been laid away, and before I could get it and have a clear blow, the two were grappling with me. Another bobby turned up then, and I was removed to the police station, but the inspector let me go, saying that the bum would hate to summon me.

After this I got into a controversy with one of the robber papers here, the Sheffield Telegraph, which frequently attacked the Socialists, and was furious when it found we were Anarchists with "Neither God nor Master" for our motto.

Well, in Gower Street I continued to practice, and though the Lord sent me an epidemic of influenza I still found that my earnings did not justify Rent, so I refused to pay until the bums came, and took an inventory, and having induced me to sign a paper giving them authority to break in if necessary after five days, and promising to pay the expenses, they left me without leaving a man in charge as they would otherwise have done.

I had, however, made up my mind to pay no heed to the law or any of their regulations, so a day or two after the bums left I removed my furniture to a safe place and bid defiance to law and landlord robbery.

At the expiration of the five days the bums came one day in my absence, and took a few sticks that were left and some things which I thought their respect for the law would prevent their taking. A

that any contract to pay rent was binding, but on the contrary, if I could have avoided payment I would have done so though I had abundant means-for my morality teaches me that I ought to give the money to the Revolutionary propaganda, and only in so doing would I be true to myself.

See then how this present hateful system presses on the poor man. He has to pay rent for that which is his own, after having paid for it a thousand times, and not alone that, but when he is suffering from want of food and clothes for his family, while out of work through no fault of his own, then, to overwhelm him in his misery, the atrocious Law, which he is fool enough to respect, sends its bloodhounds in the hated, the abominable bums, and tears from his house the poor furniture necessary for his comfort and that of his poor wife and children.

O vile Law! oh hateful authority! Oh disgusting bum bailiffs and policemen. Oh woe and destruction to the rich devourers of the poor. Comrades, I have made this letter too long already, and did not intend when I began to make it so serious. Let us, however, to get, up our spirits, turn to the gay and festive proceedings in the Town Hall on Thursday last, when I had the honour to be accused of stealing I shall consider it an honour whenever I am brought up, for some big stealing or plundering of the rich, but, Holy Moses; stealing my own furniture?!

Law, like Theology, comrades, is full of subtle, deep, unfathomable fictions which are the delight of the legal or theological mind, and: only the eye of chicane or faith can penetrate the mysteries. "I love it, I believe it, just because it is absurd", says the legal sophist or the saint.

Now, as we never know anything about these matters, it might very well be, and some awfully solemn booby of a judge may yet pronounce it to be good law that the owner of my house, having had, the first grab at my goods and chattels, has the right to keep them all. I am safe that I don't belong to her myself, as in ancient times; and if it were still the Law, fools would still respect it. But

I have other creditors; therefore it seems to me that, even on legal grounds I am bound not to abandon them, and, really, if my goods were fairly divided, the landlady has already got more than her share, for. she took my hair-brushes and combs, besides a table, a chair, and a bench, my cups and saucers, and all my handsome knives, forks, and spoons and still she is not happy!

Well, as you know, the matter was brought forward for the landlady by the practised and practising thief of an attorney, A. Muir Wilson, who, I am proud to say, found my conduct very reprehensible. When such wretches, or any of their class, abuse us, we may be certain we are in the true path of virtue. He was very angry with me, for he quite counted on my falling into the trap he had laid for me... Having tried to get a warrant and failed, he said to his client, "We will summon him, and if he is fool enough to come on a summons we will have him safe." This is the beauty of the Law: it is all traps and pitfalls for the poor man, while it is a rope of sand when it tries, to bind the rich.

But the exhibition of rage on the part of this pettifogging this this vendor of chicane, fraud, and lies-was delightful to behold, and so satisfactory also, showing, as it did, the fix the property owners had got into in the matter.

How finely indignant the creature was about Creaghe's infamous conduct! "These men are all cowards", says the brave little Wilson Cowards, eh? Wily Wilson! "Will you walk into my parlour?", says the spider to the fly. "Thank you kindly for your attention", says the fly, "But I really think you ought to send a blue-bottle to escort me there in proper state worthy of the dignity due to my action". "Coward," says the little spider, "You are afraid". "If I only had golden bag", says the fly, "I would have weight enough to break your web and defy it", and the poor little hungry spider prances around with baffled rage. "Hear him squeal", he shouts. Naturalists tell us that there exists a race of spiders, the males of which are so wretched and contemptible, that the females, who are much braver and stronger, frequently devour them for breakfast. They have to

be very careful, when approaching their better halves on amorous joys intent, not to get within reach of their jaws the ladies make a poor mouthful of them and ask for more. Such a spider, it appears to me, the brave Muir Wilson, pettifogger-at-Law, is. Enough of the little licensed thief!

The Telegraph, comrades, has dubbed me "citizen." I protest it is too respectable a name. A citizen is a man with rights, "equal rights before the Law." Now, we claim no rights but only Freedom, and, that we will have in spite of the Law, which is the only barrier that keeps us from the attainment of it.

Comrades, as requested by Comrade Nicoll to give you some account of what has been passing here, and which by good fortune has roused a decided No-Rent feeling on the part of some of the workers and an overwrought dread of it on the part of the exploiters.

It began in March, when I was summoned for assaulting a bailiff and policeman. I had taken a second house in the East end of the town where I set up another Dispensary, but my object chiefly was to sell in the shop Socialist and Freethought literature. I also hoped I may say, to get some more patients than in Gower Street, where I was doing badly.

Well, what happened, comrades, is a proof, if proof were wanting, how much better for our propaganda and for the interests of freedom, it is to have bad, that is to say, exacting and unscrupulous capitalists, but for that I had as landlady, a thoroughly unscrupulous thief, we never would have had the fun that followed. The woman authorised me to get some large panes of glass, that those broken might be replaced with new ones, and afterwards refused to pay for them, so I decided it was a case where there was a good opportunity for beginning the No-Rent campaign. After a little the