A Red × here means that if we don't hear from you (with enclosure) we shall cut off your supply.

THE PLEBS MAGAZINE

"I can promise to be candid but not impartial."

Vol. X. July, 1918. No. 6

CONTENTS

The Class-Struggle in South Wales

II.

WE have already described succinctly the evolution of industry in Glamorgan and Monmouthshire as it proceeded up to the close of the first quarter of the 19th century and even later, and have, at some length, delineated the social characteristics and economic interests of the capitalist class in that region. We have shown these springing up, both system and class, on a soil unencumbered by any earlier industrial formations and types in what was, virtually, a great wilderness of hills and dales. "What," said Crawshay Bailey, the iron-master of Nantyglo, at an Anti-Chartist meeting in Coalbrookvale in May, 1839, "was the state of this valley 50 years ago? Nothing could be heard from Brynmawr to Aberbeeg, but the solitary sound of a blacksmith's hammer, with some two hundred inhabitants, but now may be heard the sound of machinery, employed in converting

the minerals that then lay buried under these mountains into finished iron, and containing a population of 10,000 souls."—(*Merthyr Guardian.*) Crawshay Bailey and his fellow-capitalists held the view, natural enough, when we understand capitalist psychology, which he expressed thus :—" I owe all that I have to my own industry." And we may take it that they were at one with him in adding, " and I would sacrifice my life rather than lose my property."

Those two inter-related statements admirably sum up the attitude adopted by the coal and iron masters towards their possessions, and afford an excellent introduction to a study of those social conditions under which they were content that their wage-workers should labour. We will now leave the employers for a while and go to meet the proletariat as it makes its way into the desolate valleys of West Monmouth and North-East Glamorgan.

We shall find that this stream of immigrants came in from all over South Wales, from the agricultural area of Monmouth east of Pontypool, from Gloucester, Somerset, Devon, Wiltshire and, sometimes, even from Cornwall and that it consisted in great measure of the dispossessed and disinherited, whom the enclosures of the 18th century had driven from the soil, that it was swollen by others whom the high cost of living impelled towards the furnaces and coal mines and by certain adventurous spirits who craved the relative freedom and excitement of industrial life as an escape from the dumb-drudge of the homestead and the village. In so far as it was Welsh and hailed from Cardigan, Pembroke, Caermarthen, Brecon and Radnorshire, it was a simple folk, which, if it had been forced to abandon the old tribal economy for generations or even centuries, still clung to the habits and thoughts of old Wales. It was a people, alien in race, speech, religion and ideas to its new employers and to the English or " Seisson " workers with whom it gradually came in contact. It was bad enough for the English labourer to be dragged into the mine and the factory from the life of his village, but it was far worse for the Welshman and the Irishman, who belonged still to a much more primitive social order. There is something pitiful about the helpless, dazed, exploited and ruthlessly browbeaten Celts who came to make millions for the capitalist invader, who leased from the robber lords the filched land of their fathers. May it be our task to make plain to the Seisson workers of England the wrongs which have made the Welshmen somewhat difficult for them to understand and to build a bridge of sympathy and comprehension across which we can pass to them and they to us, knitting firmer our alliance against the common and hereditary enemy !

The Welshman was a subdued and expropriated occupier of the soil, compelled to bow beneath the yoke of an invading lord who had held him down by force and continued to rule him by means of the

devices of a higher civilisation and superior technique of warfare. Where the lord of the manor or ward was a native Welshman he had conformed to the standards and stared the outlook of the Seisson usurpers. To the conflict of class was added the conflict of race. Moreover, whilst the Roman Catholic religion had been established in Wales it came as the faith of an invader and the Welsh continued in some degree their allegiance to the earlier Christianity of the Celtic peoples and to the Druidical worship of their tribal past. Hence they had less inclination towards the religious counterpart of feudalism which remained as the doctrinal basis of Anglican Christianity. They rejected the English Church as the state-ordained worship of the land thieves of the Reformation, a pseudo-spiritual police system for holding down the lower orders and consecrating private property in the means of life. Thus the Revival of the early 18th century had taken hold upon the Welsh peasantry, and they had favourably received both Baptism and Methodism, more particularly where these inclined towards the Calvinism so sympathetic to the mentality of a hill-dwelling people. The Welshman, like the Lowland Scot, lived in the 17th and 18th centuries on an infertile soil, where subsistence could be won in the sweat of his brow, but no more than bare livelihood gained with such tools as he commanded. He felt himself in sympathy with the hill-tribesmen of Judea, recognised their life as akin to his own and adopted their place names for his chapels and their personal names for his children.

But his Dissent expressed itself in congregational and institutional forms of his own, reflecting the traditions of his past. These forms he transplanted from his agricultural to his industrial surroundings and placed his tabernacles in Dowlais and Tredegar, so that in his economic and political agitations we find him a Nonconformist, and in his utterances and actions very often a clansman harking back, as Jesus of Nazareth himself and his stormy comrades, Boanerges, appear to have done, to primitive communism and the tribal brotherhood.

Without adequate recognition of the influence which their religious life had upon the people in all their activities, it would be well nigh useless to attempt to examine the early labour movement in South Wales, or, for that matter, to comprehend its peculiarities at the present time.

The people down in Caermarthenshire and the South West generally, who came trekking up to Merthyr, lived under the most miserable circumstances, in little better than mud-huts, or what the Scotch would call " clachans," the floors were of mud, the rooms were small, the beds were shut off in cupboards as in Scotland, and the ventilation was execrable. Drainage simply did not engage attention, and the amenities of a healthy existence were utterly ignored. Hence when they came up to Hirwain, to Merthyr

or to Blaenavon they may not have found their lodgment so bad except that it tended to be very congested and housing construction did not keep pace with the demand for labour. We learn that, at the last-named place at the close of the 18th century, Cox, in his tour of Monmouthshire, found the workers housed beneath the arches of a tramway bridge near the furnaces. The Commissioners enquiring into the Physical and Moral Condition of the Children and Young Persons employed in Mines in 1843 reported that " perhaps the most miserable hovels inhabited by the working people are to be found in the neighbourhood of the Hirwain Works, and they derive a more comfortless appearance from the barren surface of the plain in which they are situated. Many of these are nothing more than mud cabins, in many instances a deserted cow-shed converted into a human habitation ; a rude thatch forms the roof, and apparently to avoid the storms that sweep along that plain, they are built in every hollow that can be found where of course they receive the drainage of the surrounding elevations. . . . A more cheerless place could scarcely be found in South Wales." (Para. 122, p. 490.) Jellinger Symons, a Commissioner, writing in 1855, said :—" The annals of human filth and grime . . . nowhere present anything worse than Merthyr . . . not only is it devoid of drainage, or any possible means of removing filth from the immediate vicinity of the dwellings, but no supply of water is provided, and nearly all that comes into the place is brought on the heads of women in pitchers."—(*Industrial Capacities of South Wales*, p. 18). In 1843, there were not ten privies in the village of Blackwood. Such were the homes and such the location of the homes whereto the proletariat came, into a land that soon teemed " with grime, and all the slatternly accompaniments of animal power and moral disorder, with scarcely a ray of mental or spiritual intelligence."—*Report of the Enquiry into the State of Education in Wales* (Monmouthshire). Vol. XXVII., Part II., p. 291.)

The immigrants came, " rude and primitive agriculturists, living poorly and thinly scattered," to be " smelters and miners, wantoning (sic !) in plenty and congregated in the densest accumulations." R. W. Wheeler Lingen tells us how " An incessant tide of immigration sets in from the former extreme to the latter, and by perpetuating a common character in each, admits of their being contemplated under a single point of view. Externally, indeed, it would be impossible to exhibit a greater contrast in the aspect of two regions and the circumstances of their inhabitants, than by comparing the country between the rivers Towi and Teifi, with Merthyr, Dowlais, Aberdare, Maesteg, Cwm Afon, and the vales of Neath and Swansea. Yet the families, which are daily passing from the one scene to the other, do not thereby change their relative position in society. A new field is open to them, but not a wider. They are never masters, and if the rural portion of them does not

grow in numbers, nor manifest any fresh activity, while the other is daily augmented and put upon fresh or more extended enterprizes, the difference is to be sought in the classes to which they are severally subjected and not in themselves. It is still the same people. Whether in the country or among the furnaces, the Welsh element is never found at the top of the social scale, nor in its own body does it exhibit much variety of gradation. In the country, the farmers are very small holders, in intelligence and capital nowise distinguished from labourers."—(*Reports of the Commissioners of Enquiry into the State of Education in Wales*, 1847. (Carmarthen, Glamorgan, and Pembroke, pp. 2 and 3.)

Here we have the picture of the Welsh, an agricultural folk, a subject people, serving "the Seisson" either as agrarian or as industrial capitalist, as bourgeois or as feudalist, a community of equals in economic and social status, amongst whom private property, however tenaciously grasped and eagerly sought, is but in its infancy. We are told that the tongue of the Welshman "is a language of old-fashioned agriculture, of theology, and of simple rustic life, while all the world about him (in his new environment) is English." "Cut off from . . . the practical world, his mental faculties . . . have hitherto been exerted almost exclusively upon theological ideas. In this direction too . . . his worship, like his life, has grown different from that of the classes over him" (*Ibid*). This sympathetic and kindly observer tells us, moreover, of the Sunday Schools, in which, he said, the Welsh had had conspicuous success, that "the constitution throughout is purely democratic, presenting an office and some sort of title to almost every man who is able and willing to take an active part in its administration, without much reference to his social position during the other six days of the week . . . these schools . . . the topics in them are those of the most general interest; and are treated in a manner partly didactic, partly polemical, partly rhetorical, the most universally appreciated. Finally, every man, woman and child feels at home in them. . . . It is all among neighbours and equals. . . . Common habits of thought pervade all. . . . They are intelligible or excusable to one another. . . . They are real fields of mental activity. The Welsh working man rouses himself for them. Sunday is to him more than a day of bodily recreation and rest. It is his best chance, all the week through, of showing himself in his own character."—(*Ibid*, p. 3.) When we are informed, also, what was true at that time, "this mining and manufacturing community . . . contains no middle class, such as those who commonly constitute a vestry," we understand what all this most illuminating study signifies. The reader of Engels and Lafargue will see in these Dissenting Sunday Schools, latter day expressions of the folk life and popular customs of an earlier period. He will see his grandparents, if he is a Welshman, congregating together in Cal-

vary, Bethel, Hermon or Sion, on the one day when they were not needed to create surplus-value, shutting the door upon the outside world of Egyptian bondage, of Babylonian captivity, drawn apart as a peculiar and chosen people to worship and to glorify their conception of the Godhead, a god who dwelt in the hearts of an agricultural people, after a manner hallowed by custom and wondrous solacing. Let him remember that there was none, or next to, no middle class, that Lord Rhondda's grandfather was emerging from wage-slavery at Cyfarthfa, and that David Davis had just opened a little shop of all sorts in Aberdare or Herwain, whilst David Davies, of the Ocean Colleries, was a sawyer in Cardigan, and Thos. Powell had not sunk pits in the Aberdare Valley. The whole generation of native capitalists was yet incipient, and the master-class was overwhelmingly English in composition. If he will observe these facts he will, maybe, understand better some of the problems even of his own generation. He will have more sympathy with the old school of trade unionists and comprehend how natural it is that the Welshman should be loth to recognise, find it hard to discern the cleavages which modern capitalism has so recently driven in the ranks of his people, dividing them into capitalists, lower middle-class and proletarians with conflicting interests and irreconcileable points of view.

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(To be continued.)