

Modern Socialism writer before us: heartsick over the troubles of his fellow-men, with hopes and questionings for the future colouring every hour of his life.

### 'MISERY AND THE WAY OUT

'WHAT is the condition of Society under which we live? Is it satisfactory, is it quite as we should all like it to be? Does it quite please you who are listening to me, so that there is nothing you want to alter in it?

'If that is the case, then none of my hearers are poor, and none have any fear of becoming poor; I am speaking to a crowd of rich men who are quite sure that they will always be rich. Well I see that is not quite the case; some of us are poor, some of us are afraid of becoming poor; some of us have to do very unpleasant work; all of us have to work more than we like; and we know of people who are worse off in all these matters than we are: So we do want to alter things if we could: we are not quite contented: if we say we are, we are not speaking truly but say so because we don't want to argue, or because we want to get something out of rich people whose interest it is that we should be contented.

'Well I should wonder if we were contented; for when we look at the present state of Society we find that the majority of people have every reason to wish to be better off than they are, that in point of fact they are living in misery. Let us look at the various conditions of life and see what proportion of the whole people has good reason to be pleased with their share of the wealth, ease, good living, in a word, the happiness of this most highly civilized country.

'Now first, the greatest part of us have to work, all those who are not very rich that is; it is true that what is usually thought the lowest stratum of Society is generally supposed not to, the criminal population, the vagabonds, loafers, and so forth, some of them do work very hard, undergoing all kinds of hardships, plenteous weariness, and as far as I know don't earn very high wages for all that: they at least I

should think have a good right to be discontented: perhaps you will say that they have made their bed and must lie in it, that 'tis their own faults; I am not sure whether 'tis worth while arguing on the matter, but I think I shall be able to show later on that it is not their own faults as a class, that their lives with all their horrible sufferings and still more horrible degradation are made by the present state of Society, and are an essential part of it.

'But let us leave them and go a step higher; let us look at the condition of the lower order of labourers: those who live most from hand to mouth, those who are themselves conscious of being sweated and oppressed and who cannot help being conscious of it, including a vast number of poor women who have no protectors or bread-earners to help them and are obliged to work for themselves without help, to earn themselves such livelihood as they do earn. In London at least we all know of this class, and that it is not such a very small one because it is always being recruited by those who have been unsuccessful in various trades and livelihoods. Well have these any reason to be discontented? I confess I have never dared to myself to visit the homes of these poor people though I have seen them in the streets and have heard plenty about them: I know of them that they work hard and very hard, that they live in daily fear of being deprived of that hard work miserably paid as it is: I know that their houses, their clothes, their food, all are foul, wretched, unhuman, a shame even to think of. Well, is it their faults that have brought them to this? Friends, there are not wanting people who will say, Yes it is their faults, that if these poor wretches had been (at what period of their poverty) thrifty, provident, sober, courageous, they would not have been in this condition: I say these people are liars: I use the word in its fullest significance and say they are liars. Granted that this class of the miserably poor is recruited by people who have made mistakes in life, or who are vicious or whatever it may be called, we all know well enough that as a class they have never had the chance offered to them of

being thrifty and provident: if a man of the well-to-do classes is a drunkard or otherwise vicious does it necessarily follow from his vice that he will become poor, or even poorer than he otherwise would be? a very small acquaintance with the modern scandalous chronicle will answer that question. No, be sure that this class of poor wretches who have such very good reason for being discontented with the present conditions of Society is a necessary product of that society and will only cease to exist when, it does.

'And now let us go a little higher yet, one step—not a great one; and consider the condition of the ordinary labourers, the unskilled, including in that class the ordinary agricultural labourer. Shall we ask him to be contented? We all know what his lot is; daily toil without hope: insufficient coarse food: bad housing, no amusement, no pleasure scarcely even of the most animal kind, no education; a short life: if you think the last thing a blessing rather under his circumstances, well and good, only remember it means general ill-health while he does live: also I forgot, he has one place of refuge before he reaches the last haven of rest, and that refuge the workhouse, where he is looked on by everybody including himself as a sort of criminal. Nay I won't ask him to be contented. Well, and it is his fault also that he is in that position? I believe you will find people to assert that also, and I will waste no words in saying what I think of *them*. Again I assert that his life, his misery and anxiety and overwork rather, scarce worth calling a life, are absolutely necessary to the existence of the present state of Society: I tell you that, let him raise his class even but a little out of its present horrible condition, and the foundations of Society will be shaken.

'Again a step; this time a bigger one: we have got to the skilled artisan. Surely he might almost be contented with his lot: at any rate if he is not, it is not for want of being preached at, and having it pointed out to him in one way or other that he is really quite a rich man; there he is with a

vote, happy fellow! able to pay subscriptions to societies and Trade Unions, money in the savings-bank, money in building-societies; and in short able to [do] a great deal more with (a precarious) say 38s. a week than I could do—even if I were a conjuror: that's the view of him through rose-colour glass: I can conceive an evil-disposed man, an agitator say, looking at him through a medium less sweetly pretty, and seeing him to be overworked and not overpaid, wretchedly housed, without intellectual amusement, his work mere drudgery, unhonoured, unrewarded; at best a workman not a man, a machine that is, fed and housed and tended as a machine is, that is to say, enough to enable [him] to go on working for ever—No, not for ever: for please to remember whatever his wages may be, they are and must be precarious, as too many of our countrymen are feeling at the present moment: a change in machinery, a glut in the market, and out into the streets he goes with plenty of leisure to study the average of wages: and what becomes of his money in the savings-bank, in the building-society? Nay what becomes of his bits of sticks at home? Remember too how hard he and his have fought to bring the wages up to the point at which they are, to raise the standard of life with him to what it is—such as it is. Remember that he has done that for himself by combining with his fellows: think how pleased his employers would have been if they could have kept that standard down! Why, they would have made England the first country in the world—for ever—if only those foolish working men had been contented to live upon less, to run a race with their French and German brethren in pinching themselves for the glory of England: alas my friends for your lack of thrift and your want of knowledge of the true principles of political economy, which would have taught you the beauty of starving yourselves to-day that your sons might be worse starved years hence! Well, well, such as you are you have become by your discontent aristocracy of labour: but even if you are pleased with your present condition, and see nothing left to strive for but the

abolition of the House of Lords, I warn you you will not keep it without fresh discontent, and ever fresh discontent. Friends, you must battle to keep your present condition, I say, and in the course of that battle you will begin to see that there are ever fresh things ahead for you to struggle for and at last that it is all or nothing : believe me it will very soon be all then.

'So far I have been going on one line and speaking of those who earn their living by manual labour, by labour which tries the bodily strength chiefly; but I cannot go further without mentioning another class of workers, whose work however it may enfeeble their bodies, does not strain their muscles: the clerks and shop-assistants I mean; and I think you will all agree with me in thinking that they at least have some reasons for discontent: of course I am speaking of the rank and file of them, and of them I will say that they seem to me far worse off than the artisans: nominally they belong to the middle-class, but their earnings are lower than those of artisans, and they are compelled to make a show of gentility, save the mark, and moreover have less hope of rising out of their misery, for indeed it is no less, than an ordinary skilled workman at any rate; and their position such as it is, is I should say even more precarious than that of the artisans: it is strange however that with such very solid reasons for discontent, the clerks as a body are reactionary in their politics: I suppose it is their very hopelessness which forces them to follow the politics of their bosses: well, we cannot ask any individual of their class to run the risk of instant dismissal by overt acts of what the said bosses would call rebellion; yet I do call on them to think about the matter, to cherish their discontent, to make up their minds to the fact that they are in a wretched and slavish condition from no fault of their own, and to do all they can to help us short of incurring the pain of dismissal: we cannot do without them; taking the widest definition of their class, they are a huge mass of men, unfitted by their present slavery for most useful occupations, but not without

education : the very conditions, I say straightforwardly, for turning men into revolutionists.

'What other classes or groups are there which have reason for discontent with the present state of things? We are not very far up the social ladder yet, I think there must be one or two more : or what do [you] think of the pleasures of the life of a small shop-keeper? His freedom from sordid anxiety, his leisure; his plentiful opportunities for exercising his body and improving his mind? You see he belongs to a body of men whose occupation is undoubtedly doomed to extinction : the great store, Whiteley's or such like on the one side, the Co-operative Store on the other, are drawing nearer and nearer to the wretched small tradesman like the two claws of a nutcracker, and day by day he is forced into the ranks of the manual labourers or the servile army of clerks. Once again I call on the small shopkeepers also, although they may consider themselves to belong to the middle-class, to join their most righteous discontent to the discontent of the lower classes, in the full certainty that nothing else will help them.

'Higher yet: shall we speak of the farmers, whom also the present system bears hardly enough on: I don't sympathise with their troubles quite so much as I should indeed if I could [put] out of my head the thought of the lives their labourers lead; if I could forget the contrast between the jolly, well-fed burly farmer between 50 and 60 years old and his labourer, the miserable worn-out bow-backed crawling old man of 50 or 60 who has helped him to his burliness and jollity: still it is not to be denied that here also the present system has done no marvels of prosperity: here also among the farmers is plentiful cause for discontent: perhaps even among them we might win a few recruits.

'Once more, how is it with the professional classes? the noble class of hangers-on to which I myself belong? Here at any rate I am at home, and I think I can tell you something about them. Well, perhaps we ought to be contented:

we are well clothed, well fed, well housed: we at least have reaped the advantages of the progress of civilization: for us perhaps education is more than a name: for us the standard of intelligence has really been raised since the middle-ages: it is we who in a sense rule our rulers, tell them what to think, what to admire, how to express their thoughts, and arrange their mandates into words which their slaves or masters will listen to. For us the history of the world, the memory of man, lies open; for us the course of nature, her operations, and the hopes and fears to be deduced from them, have been unveiled. Yes, our bodies and our minds are both well cared for; there need be no limit to our aspirations for the good opinion of our fellow-men while we live and after we are dead: neither our anxieties nor our responsibilities should be crushing: even if our business ties us to the filth and hubbub of a great town for the greatest part of the year, we are almost all of us rich enough to be able to rest ourselves by change of scene and the contemplation of the beauties of nature and art during some time of the year: and when we are at work there is mostly with us some interest in the work we have to do: not infrequently indeed we have chosen our careers on those very grounds: easy in our lives then, our minds expanded by education so that we never lack amusement, and with more or less congenial employment, we at least are bound to be contented whoever else above or below us are discontented.

'Is it so indeed? yet here I stand before you, one of the most fortunate of this happy class, so steeped in discontent, that I have no words which will express it: no words, nothing but deeds, wherever they may lead me to, even [if] it be ruin, prison, or a violent death. And I think you will believe me when I say that my case is not so uncommon among men of my class: nay the members of the S.D.F. who address you are by no means all of them working-men, there are plenty of them who are in the same position as myself; and who work harder for the extinction of their class than I do. Well and why is this, what are our causes for discon-

tent? It may well be that as a class we have none, but as individuals you must remember that our position also is precarious: for as some men may by dint of good luck, tireless industry and hardness of heart climb up out of their class into ours: so it is by no means uncommon for some of our class through it may be some softness or unfitness or maybe through sheer ill luck to fall from our class into the lower; which is then the very lowest class: I say straight out that to my certain knowledge this is not uncommon. The truth is we discontented ones of the intellectual or hanger-on group are conscious that the whole thing is a desperate battle, and we are not contented to oppress those below us as we must do under the present system, not only for the sake of keeping ourselves in our position but also for the sake of piling up the monstrous fortunes of the rich men whose hangers-on we are: whatever advantages we possess over others we are willing and anxious to give up if by so doing we can win a decent life for ourselves and for others; a life from which the terrible element of precariousness should be absent: that is one thing but we may take higher ground and say that all that civilization has cultivated our sensibility only to disappoint it, and that we suffer (merely selfishly if you will) from the consciousness of the mass of suffering and brutality which lies below our lucky class-ugliness all about us, the world made for naught. In short we see that that system which involves a desperate struggle for bare life in the lower classes, which condemns the greater part of men to live a life unhappier than that of the brutes, and little less brutal, and which forces us even to live a life of fear and risk, can only lead the world towards civilization by destroying itself; and I must tell you that some of us have been driven to see this, and to take note of the fact that our present system is eating its own heart out by the visible ugliness and lack of dignity of all life under it: we know enough of history to see that the dawn and progress of our present system has gone hand in hand with the sickness and continued sickness of all beauty, all pleasure in

life: we see before us a great gulf gaping for the extinction of all the hopes of civilization, and into which many excellent things have already been swept; we see that nothing can fill it up save a complete change in our system—nothing save revolution; therefore we are discontented and revolutionists!

'If these reasons are not enough for our discontent, I can give you none other: I can only say we are driven by discontent and unhappiness into a longing for revolution: that we are oppressed by the consciousness of the class of toiling slaves below us, that we despise the class of idle slave-owners above us, whose hangers-on we are: if you distrust us because we are their hangers-on, at least make use of us for the furtherance of the cause.

'Now whether there are any discontented people above this class of hangers-on to which I belong, doesn't much matter, because in number they do not amount to much: let us call all such classes the contented classes; and indeed, as a class I fear you must add my own hanger-on class, who are only discontented so far as their position as guardians of the morals and intellect of their richer masters forces them to be more intellectually active than they.

'But for the others of those classes I have named I say that they have a full call to be discontented, that in few words they live in misery; yes even the better-off of them, so dull their lives are, though they may scarce know it or feel it, so empty of all pleasure though they live in a world which is beautiful and might be full of pleasure.

'And now comes the question, what hope of salvation from this misery is there? for here at least if there is but a glimmer of a hope will be pleasure, great enough sometimes I think. Now the misery I have been speaking of is to a great extent admitted by most people who give themselves the trouble to think of such matters, but much diversity of opinion there is as to the nature of the hope which may cast a ray of sunlight on it: those who do not feel the misery in their proper persons, and who venture to solace their not

very acute sorrow about other men's troubles by indulging in hope, have some of them a vague sort of idea that general progress, the spread of liberal ideas, the growth of education and the rest will little by little raise the condition of the lower classes as they too truly call them: nor can I say that they are wrong otherwise than in being vague; only if they could but see into the matter and have a vision that was not vague, of how that progress will work, I fear they would be startled indeed and cry out, No no, we didn't mean that! Then there are others of a sterner mould who have got involved in those lies about thrift and industry which I have spoken of before, who will tell you that it is possible if not easy for any working-man by practise of the said thrift and industry to raise himself out of his class. Well of course that is no answer to the question as to how the miserable *classes* can escape from their misery; for 'tis quite clear that if those beautifully thrifty and industrious individuals can get out of their class-wretchedness they must leave their class behind them; that in fact they rise at the cost of the mass of their fellows whose average of thrift and industry they exceed.

'Again I say that our friends the thrift-mongers when they are not liars more or less unconsciously, are very vague, and cannot realize in the least in the world, at what point the bettering of a class by the giving up of its more energetic members, is to stop: the fact is that under the system which rules us the general thrift of a class will not in the least better it as a class: exactly to the degree of its thrift, that is to say, its capacity to live on less, its wages will be lowered; and the misery will still be there; clean misery, undrunken misery, maybe, but misery all the same; an empty cupboard and an anxious bed.

'In other words, under the present system there is no hope of the working-class bettering their condition as a class: whatever partial amelioration they have gained has been in spite of the system, in its teeth; they have torn those advantages from the richer classes at their expense. Why, the

words are still ringing in my ears that our class, the middle class, cast at the Trades Unions twenty years ago; some of the younger of you perhaps scarcely remember the virulence of the expressions of hatred that even would-be Liberals allowed themselves to use against them—why? because we felt they were bettering their class at the expense of ours: we are civil enough to them now; again why? Because of the progress of more liberal opinion among the middle-classes?—no no no: because we feel that they have gone the length of their tether and can gain nothing more for their class at the expense of ours; their teeth are drawn, we are no longer afraid of them.

'I so much want you to understand this point clearly that I repeat it at the risk of wearying you: It is *of the essence* of society as at present constituted, of society based on the system of capital and wages that the wage-earners shall earn no more than is necessary for them to sustain their power of labour and reproduce their kind. It is true that the standard of this subsistence varies somewhat: in times when commerce is brisk it will have a tendency to rise, in times when things are slack it will fall; but up to a certain point, that of independence of daily precarious, compulsory labour, it cannot rise, and below the point of keeping men in tolerable animal strength it cannot fall, although it has not seldom come perilously near to that point. Our present society therefore is based on the perpetual servitude and misery of the wage-earning classes; any amelioration of that misery (as we have seen with reference to the Trades Unions) shakes society, and the destruction of the misery would mean the destruction of Society.

'Now when you have fully got to comprehend this you must as a matter of course see the futility of those vague dreams of improvement held by the ordinary middle-class Liberals: I mean the kind of thing represented by those who say very gravely that people are much better off than they were; that the progress of education will show the poor how they can live better than they know how to at present; and

that, as aforesaid, it is only the worthless among them that need remain poor; as all the rest may if they will only try hard enough rise into the condition of comfort and refinement.

'To those who are poor I know that this must sound like a cruel jest; but 'tis commonly said in so much good faith as a person can have who half consciously deceives himself so that he may dull the feeling of responsibility which would otherwise trouble him: at the best, you see, and supposing it true, those who console themselves with this vague comfort must make up their minds to wait generation after generation, thousands of years I should say, before they can expect to see even the beginning of the end of poverty. Well, such consolation as that joined to the comfortable assurance that at any rate it can't be helped, that these things simply come in the order of nature: all this I say may be enough for smothering the pain which the rich suffer from the misery of the poor: but for my part I dare not offer it to the poor themselves: if I thought it true I should be very careful to do all I could to keep a fine army and police made up of people practically belonging to the middle-classes; I should if I could do my best to prevent the poor from learning so much even as to read and write: I think also I should get people to preach to the poor and tell them that if they only knew it they are better off than I am; that theirs is the real condition of happiness since they have nothing to lose; that there is something holy and glorious in being weary, dirty, ignorant and hungry, and that when they die they will go to heaven and be happy ever after with absolutely nothing to do, whereas I when I die expect to go to—'tother place, and be eternally tormented. I think I should feel also that this would be accepted as such a very likely thing on the assumption that there is anything like justice in the universe, that it would be hardly necessary to preach any more morality to them: but perhaps sometimes when I was in a very cowardly mood and at the same time despised the intellect of the poor especially, I should set people to telling them that I (the rich man) was very useful to them,

and provided them with work, and consequently victuals by the simple process of doing nothing and living luxuriously. Of course I could not pretend to believe any of this myself, but I repeat that if I were only careful enough about my army and police and in withholding education from them, I might be moderately comfortable a-nights and not dream too much of being surrounded by a crowd of terrible beings fierce-eyed and careless of anything but rapine, deaf to my prayers for mercy, nay though they were called my countrymen they would not talk the same tongue as a gentleman.

'Well, you know this kind of solace to the rich for the grief of the poor has been tried long enough, nay still is, and even more than we middle-class people often think; because in truth that other solace drawn from the figures of Mr Giffen and such-like men that things are after improving, is but an adjunct to the first solace; a kind of luxury of conscience-stifling; perhaps resorted to because a dim consciousness is creeping over the rich that after all the condition of the poor may be a matter partly in their own hands.

'Yes, friends, that is the comfort, and the only one that I can venture to offer to the poor for their share of the discontent of modern Society; I say again their welfare lies in their own hands if they only knew it. If you think of it, you must see that on no other grounds could I venture to stand here and remind you of how hardly the world uses you: if it were indeed true that all those groups of people I have spoken of were living in those varied degrees of misery, because the eternal order of things must needs have it so, what could I say save to bid you bear it as well as you could, and to hope that there might be a heaven hereafter as there is full certainly a hell here?

'Friends, this earthly hell is not the ordinance of nature but the manufacture of man; made I will believe not by their malice but their stupidity; and it is your business to destroy it: to destroy it, I say, not each man to try to climb up out of it, as your thrift-teachers tell you, but to make an end of it so that no one henceforth can ever fall into it. I say

again that is your business; and if you understood the matter rightly, you have no other business than that until you have accomplished it.'

I omit the rest, giving the passage which ends the lecture:

'If we live to see the day when that slavery receives its death wound we shall regret no labour or pain that we have spent in the cause: no men that have ever lived will have been so happy as we shall be. Big words, do you think? I cannot help it, the cause is great too. Indeed sometimes I have heard it said, "the change you strive for is so prodigious, so far transcending any revolution that has yet happened, that we dare not think about it, it seems such an idle hope." Well, one might say, Don't think about it, then, but act for it, and he who lives will see. But furthermore is it not natural that the revolution we are looking for should be the greatest of all? in these days when man's knowledge and mastery over material nature has so increased, it might be well expected that not only the change in Society will be tremendous when it is ripe for the change, but also that the prize of the change should be proportionally great: I can only say if that were not so, if in these days there were no great ideal ahead of us, no hope for a life on earth better than the world has yet seen, if the present condition of war hypocritically veiled with a sham of peace is to go on for ever, then all the promises and hopes of progress are mere delusions and lies: then have we gained knowledge and mastered the forces of nature that we might be more unhappy than ever, and the future of the world is like to be universal melancholy madness.

'All which I know can't be true, I know that we are moving onward: everywhere we see the apathy of the last 25 years breaking up into hopeful discontent, and if it be true, as Mr Giffen says it is, that the condition of the workers is improving, then so much the more hopeful is that discontent, because it proves that men are preparing to claim a higher standard of life: and we call on them to raise that

standard ever higher, until they at last claim freedom with no doubtful voice and are determined to be contented with nothing less. It is to stir you up not to be contented with a little that I am here to-night: you will not get the little if you are contented with it: you *must* be either slaves or free: you are slaves at present: bear that always in mind, think of what it means: try to think of the life you might live and would naturally live if you were not forced into misery by your masters, and then I do not think you can help combining together to tell the world that you must be free and happy: and then all will soon be won.'