

SUPPLEMENT TO "THE NEW AGE."

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Mr. H. M. Hyndman and Public Affairs.*

MR. HYNDMAN'S autobiography is one of the most important political books of the time. Mr. Hyndman has had a singular career. His family was a wealthy one and mixed with the best English society. He was well-to-do himself, and enjoyed the friendship of some of the leading politicians of the 'eighties. He had every opportunity of rising to a high place in political life. Instead of that he became the leader of the Social Democratic party, perhaps the best hated political organisation which has existed in England. Mr. Hyndman does not tell us much about his conversion to the economic theories of Socialism. He has merely recorded the fact. The consequences of his adhesion to the Marxian doctrine have been grave to himself and momentous to the Socialist cause.

In looking through the accounts of his early life one is struck by his determination to acquire knowledge at first hand. That strain in Mr. Hyndman's character explains his eventually becoming a Socialist. The inquisitive mind progresses through all stages of thought. In the 'eighties Socialism was much newer to the investigator into social ideas than it is to-day. It was natural, therefore, that Mr. Hyndman should have accepted the new creed with dogmatic fervour. He had the kind of temperament which is naturally aroused to strenuous advocacy by any form of opposition. He never would admit he was wrong, because he was always satisfied, before holding an opinion or forming a judgment, that he had exhausted the essential data. A man who does that deliberately all through life is a rare being; he is a forceful personality. He will usually ruin his career from the worldly standpoint, because there is no economic basis to truth. The English searcher after truth, as Lord Bowen said, is like a blind man in a dark room searching for a black hat that is not there. In other words, he will not receive much reward for all his efforts.

Judged by the test, let us say, of the ordinary Liberal, Tory, or Labour politician, Mr. Hyndman has wrecked his career and his cause by an obstinate adhesion to principle. A man who is denounced as a narrow sectarian in politics has one advantage. The careful inquirer soon discovers that the political liar has concealed truth from the public by dismissing it with a sneer as "sectarianism." The object of the politician is to draw the public mind away from reality. Economics is the science of the realities of life. "That is why the professional politico-economist is so obscure, lest the good public should penetrate through his maze of economic formulæ to the central facts concerning the creation and distribution of wealth." Well, Mr. Hyndman, as befitted a seeker after truth, developed into a sectarian. He glories in it in these two sentences: "The reproach of sectarianism carries with it no odium for us. Truth must ever be sectarian; error alone can afford to be catholic. Yet the world, with its instinctive fear of truth, is always hostile to the sectarian in his own day. Enemies and friends combine in their stone-

throwing. Such a man is warned that he is not making "the best of his chances." As though any man can judge what is best for another! But such criticisms have their embittering effect. Time may be on your side, but life is passing. To the vulgar, "Court dress and £5,000 a year" is the proof of success. It is not much consolation to the reformer to believe that "Court dress and £5,000 a year" may, in coming generations, be tangible evidence of a man's vileness and treason. The path of sincerity is a hard one, as those who tread it soon ascertain to their cost. The following passage, on page 418, is a frank recognition of this:—

Taking the side of the weak is a very fine thing to read about in a novel, or to see played as a part on the stage, but in actual life it is a very serious and dangerous thing indeed to do.

One has, on the other hand, as some compensation, a spiritual confidence in oneself. As Wilde put it:—

To disagree with three-fourths of England on all points is one of the first elements of vanity, which is a deep source of consolation in all moments of spiritual doubt.

One may be caught between the vice of arrogance or the sin of pride, and the servility of convention. Still, it is better to be arrogant or proud than to be servile. Possibly this is reversing the copy-book maxims; but those are the first things one has to tear off one's tablets. Mr. Hyndman has been tearing up copy-book maxims all his life.

What is it that keeps men Socialists whose whole inclinations and upbringing are prejudiced against the people? It is a difficult question, but the true answer is—a sense of justice. Once the mind is convinced of the way in which the workers are deceived and robbed by the politician—and his paymasters, the landlord and capitalist—presuming one is honest, it is impossible to return to the capitalistic way of thought. As life proceeds, under the pressure of circumstances honesty may become a variable quantity in the mental equipment and moral outlook. That is why Socialism has to record many defections. But most of those who have deserted the red flag have never thoroughly accepted the articles of faith of which it is the symbol. Mr. Hyndman has no illusions on the subject of the nobility of democracy, as one may gather from these sentiments:—

No leader of a popular movement, in however small a way, must ever look or speak as if he were in the least discouraged. Should he do so, and there is no one at hand to correct the effect of this, there is a marked set back observable immediately. Of such is the making of democracy (page 341).

Again, in a speech, he told his working-class audience:—

What I did say was that the working classes of London and of England are idiots, and I say it again.

He significantly remarks: "I sat down amid a round of cheering." Well might M. Clémenceau comment: "In short, the working-class in England is a bourgeois class." But one should recollect, in the spirit of mercy, Jules Vallé's answer:—

Put a man in the street with a coat that is too large on his back, pantaloons that are too short, without a collar, without a shirt, without stockings, without a sou, had he the genius of Machiavelli, of Talleyrand, he would fall in the gutter.

And the gutter soon degrades the enthusiasms of humanity.

* "The Record of an Adventurous Life." By Henry Mayers Hyndman. (Macmillan and Co., London, 1911. 460 pp. 15s. net.)

The appearance of this book has coincided with the transfer of the membership and assets of the Social Democratic party to the British Socialist party. It may be a new label on an old liqueur. Only the future can affirm or refute that observation. Is it a confession of failure on the part of the Social Democrats? Not quite; but it is an admission of a want of success. New times require new methods and new men. The Social Democrats, who have fought a fierce and honourable combat against tremendous odds, are making their exit. Mr. Hyndman has doffed the outer habiliments of Social Democracy, assuming the softer raiment of British Socialism; but the under-garments, which are, after all, the nearest to the heart, remain much the same. It is an outward transformation which one may applaud or may deplore; but it should not be the subject of mocking and scoffing. The present writer has profoundly differed from Mr. Hyndman and has occasionally criticised his actions with severity. Still, there is no justification for the snarling with which the re-formation of the Social Democratic squadrons has been received in quarters which should have been more friendly to the principle of Socialist unity. Mr. Hyndman has led his legions into a new camp, as one would expect of him when he was convinced of the strategic weakness of the old position.

Into the details of Mr. Hyndman's career it is useless to embark. There are so many interesting happenings recorded in this book that one could fill pages with quotations. There are some matters, however, on the point of Mr. Hyndman's connection with public affairs that should be referred to. His interview with Lord Beaconsfield is a striking contribution to political history. Lord Beaconsfield dwelt, as one would imagine, on the obstacles which would rise up against Socialism:—

"You can never carry it out with the Conservative Party. That is quite certain. Your life would become a burden to you. It is only possible through such a democracy as you speak of. The moment you tried to realise it on our side you would find yourself surrounded by a phalanx of the great families who would thwart you at every turn; they and their women. And you would be no better off on the other side. . . . It is a very difficult country to move, Mr. Hyndman, a very difficult country indeed, and one in which there is more disappointment to be looked for than success."

It is worth while to compare this expression of opinion with Robert Lowe's (Lord Sherbrooke) statement upon the influence of the Chancellor of the Exchequer:—

"I am now in almost the highest position that can be attained by any Englishman who was born into my rank of life. . . . Yet I feel that I have no real influence. Matters of the highest importance are not decided by us. A small inner chamber of the great aristocratic families arranges these affairs among themselves and we have little to do but register their decrees."

To these two quotations a third must be added, in which Mr. Hyndman has placed on record a conversation he had with Lady Dorothy Nevill upon the attitude of the English aristocracy towards Socialism:—

"You are making a very great mistake, Mr. Hyndman, in devoting yourself to Socialism. We believe you to be honest in what you are doing because we have offered you all a man can hope to get in this country, and you have not chosen to take it. But you will never succeed, at any rate in your own lifetime. We have had an excellent innings, I don't deny that for a moment; an excellent innings, and the turn of the people will come some day. I see that as clearly as you do. But not yet, not yet. You will educate some of the working class, that is all you can hope to do for them. And when you have educated them we shall buy them, or, if we don't, the Liberals will, and that will be just the same for you. Besides, we shall never offer any obstinate or bitter resistance to what is asked for. When your agitation becomes really serious we shall give way a little, and grant something of no great importance, but sufficient to satisfy the majority for the time being. Our

object is to avoid any direct conflict in order to gain time. This concession will gain, let us say, ten years; it won't be less. Then at the expiration of that period you will have worked up probably another threatening demonstration on the part of the masses against what you call the class monopoly of the means and instruments of production. We shall meet you in quite an equitable and friendly spirit and again surrender a point from which we all along meant to retire, but which we have defended with so much vigour that our resistance has seemed to be quite genuine, and our surrender has for your friends all the appearance of triumph. Yet another ten years are thus put behind us, and once more you start afresh with a somewhat disheartened and disintegrated array. Once more we meet you with the same tactics of partial surrender and pleasing procrastination. But now, remember, thirty years have passed, and you have another generation to deal with, to stir up, and to educate. Not yet, Mr. Hyndman; your great changes will not come yet. . . . Far better throw in your lot with men whom you know and like, and do your best to serve the people whom you wish to benefit from the top instead of from the bottom."

Mr. Hyndman, somewhat grimly concludes by saying:

A quarter of a century has passed since this utterance, and it seems to me the aristocracy, to say nothing of the capitalists, have given way considerably less than Lady Dorothy herself believed they were prepared to surrender.

This is a book which should be studied by every citizen; it should be in the library of every serious student of public affairs. It is full of valuable information concerning all the chief European and English Socialists. There are some admirable stories in it. The style is good and clear. There are a few slips. Mr. Harold Rylett is spelt Rylott; "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel" is referred to as "The Ordeal of Julian Feverel." A joke about Melbourne attributed to Bernal Osborne's brother on page 100, is applied to Bernal Osborne on page 115.

Considering the unscrupulous character of the recent campaign carried on against the Mormons by certain "moral experts" in this country, it is just to cite Mr. Hyndman's personal experience in the State of Utah:

Although I took some pains to get information about cruelty and injustice to women, I am bound to say I never could obtain, even privately, evidence of misbehaviour which could not be paralleled at any time in the most respectable families at home; while prostitution with its concomitant evils and diseases was wholly unknown.

There is a summary of a conversation between Jaurès, Liebknecht and Hyndman, on the Dreyfus affair, Liebknecht maintaining that Dreyfus was guilty for these reasons:

"You may believe me implicitly when I tell you that there is a secret but loyal understanding between all civilised Governments to the effect that if an innocent man is by accident arrested as a spy, a notification is at once sent to that effect. I know positively and as a matter of fact that the German Government sent no such notification in Dreyfus's cases. Why? Because they could not do so."

The present writer can affirm that this secret understanding has been extended to the Russian and German "politicals," who have agreed to serve in the secret service of their countries on condition that their punishment is commuted. Should such men disobey the orders of their governments, whatever country they may be in, they are surrendered by the police without any form of extradition. Mr. Hyndman continues:

Neither Jaurès nor myself was shaken at the time. But since then I have become not so sure as I was at the moment that Liebknecht was wrong. How is it that all Dreyfus's most earnest supporters, including his brave counsel, M. Labori, have cut him?

General Picquart, on becoming Minister of War, had access to all the secret dossiers that were never produced at Rennes, because they could not be published without grave risks ensuing in France. The contents of those secret papers were privately communicated by him, it is said, to the prominent Dreyfusards. That does not alter the fact that there is no public evidence of his guilt. Lord Russell of Killowen's memorandum to Queen Victoria has remained unanswered by the accusers of Dreyfus to this day.

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