Demos, a story of English socialism

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DE MOS
A STORY OF ENGLISH SOCIALISM

BY GEORGE GISSENG

AUTHOR OF "THYRZA,"
"THE NETHER WORLD,"
ETC.

"Jene machen Partei: welch' unerlaubtes Beginnen!
Aber unsere Partei, freilich, versteht sich von selbst."

GOETHE.

LONDON
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET, W.
1908
DEMOS.

CHAPTER I.

Stanbury Hill, remote but two hours' walk from a region blasted with mine and factory and furnace, shelters with its western slope a fair green valley, a land of meadows and orchard, untouched by poisonous breath. At its foot lies the village of Wanley. The opposite side of the hollow is clad with native wood, skirting for more than a mile the bank of a shallow stream, a tributary of the Severn. Wanley consists in the main of one long street; the houses are stone-built, with mullioned windows, here and there showing a picturesque gable or a quaint old chimney. The oldest buildings are four cottages which stand at the end of the street; once upon a time they formed the country residence of the abbots of Belwick. The abbey of that name still claims for its ruined self a portion of earth's surface; but, as it had the misfortune to be erected above the thickest coal-seam in England, its walls are blackened with the fume of collieries and shaken by the strain of mighty engines. Climb Stanbury Hill at nightfall, and, looking eastward, you behold far off a dusky ruddiness in the sky, like the last of an angry sunset; with a glass you can catch glimpses of little tongues of flame, leaping and quivering on the horizon. That is Belwick. The good abbots, who were wont to come out in the summer time to Wanley, would be at a loss to recognise their consecrated home in these sooty relics. Belwick, with its hundred and fifty fire-vomiting blast-furnaces, would to their eyes more nearly resemble a certain igneous realm of which they thought much in their sojourn upon earth, and which, we may assure ourselves, they dream not of in the quietness of their last long sleep.
A large house, which stands aloof from the village and a little above it, is Wanley Manor. The county history tells us that Wanley was given in the fifteenth century to that same religious foundation, and that at the dissolution of monasteries the Manor passed into the hands of Queen Catherine. The house is half-timbered; from the height above it looks old and peaceful amid its immemorial trees. Towards the end of the eighteenth century it became the home of a family named Eldon, the estate including the greater part of the valley below. But an Eldon who came into possession when William IV. was King brought the fortunes of his house to a low ebb, and his son, seeking to improve matters by abandoning his prejudices and entering upon commercial speculation, in the end left a widow and two boys with little more to live upon than the income which arose from Mrs. Eldon’s settlements. The Manor was shortly after this purchased by a Mr. Mutimer, a Belwick ironmaster; but Mrs. Eldon and her boys still inhabited the house, in consequence of certain events which will shortly be narrated. Wanley would have mourned their departure; they were the aristocracy of the neighbourhood, and to have them ousted by a name which no one knew, a name connected only with blast-furnaces, would have made a distinct fall in the tone of Wanley society. Fortunately no changes were made in the structure by its new owner. Not far from it you see the church and the vicarage, these also unmolested in their quiet age. Wanley, it is to be feared, lags far behind the times—painfully so, when one knows for a certainty that the valley upon which it looks conceals treasures of coal, of ironstone—blackband, to be technical—and of fireclay. Some ten years ago it seemed as if better things were in store; there was a chance that the vale might for ever cast off its foolish greenery, and begin vomiting smoke and flames in humble imitation of its metropolis beyond the hills. There are men in Belwick who have an angry feeling whenever Wanley is mentioned to them.

After the inhabitants of the Manor, the most respected of those who dwelt in Wanley were the Walthams. At the time of which I speak, this family consisted of a middle-aged lady; her son, of one and twenty; and her daughter, just eighteen. They had resided here for little more than two years, but a gentility which marked their speech and demeanour, and the fact that they were well acquainted with the Eldons, from the first caused them to be looked up to. It was conjectured, and soon confirmed by Mrs. Waltham’s own admissions, that they
had known a larger way of living than that to which they
adapted themselves in the little house on the side of Stanbury
Hill, whence they looked over the village street. Mr. Waltham
had, in fact, been a junior partner in a Belwick firm, which
came to grief. He saved enough out of the wreck to make a
modest competency for his family, and would doubtless in time
have retrieved his fortune, but death was beforehand with him.
His wife, in the second year of her widowhood, came with her
daughter Adela to Wanley; her son Alfred had gone to com-
mercial work in Belwick. Mrs. Waltham was a prudent
woman, and tenacious of ideas which recommended themselves
to her practical instincts; such an idea had much to do with
her settlement in the remote village, which she would not have
chosen for her abode out of love of its old-world quietness.
But at the Manor was Hubert Eldon. Hubert was four years
older than Adela. He had no fortune of his own, but it was
tolerably certain that some day he would be enormously rich,
and there was small likelihood that he would marry till that
expected change in his position came about.

On the afternoon of a certain Good Friday, Mrs. Waltham
sat at her open window, enjoying the air and busy with many
thoughts, among other things wondering who was likely to
drop in for a cup of tea. It was a late Easter, and warm spring
weather had already clothed the valley with greenness; to-day
the sun was almost hot, and the west wind brought many a
sweet odour from gardens near and far. From her sitting-
room Mrs. Waltham had the best view to be obtained from any
house in Wanley; she looked, as I have said, right over the
village street, and on either hand the valley spread before her a
charming prospect. Opposite was the wooded slope, freshening
now with exquisite shades of new-born leafage; looking north,
she saw fruit-gardens, making tender harmonies; southwards
spread verdure and tillage. Yet something there was which
disturbed the otherwise perfect unity of the scene, an unac-
customed trouble to the eye. In the very midst of the vale,
perhaps a quarter of a mile to the south of the village, one saw
what looked like the beginning of some engineering enterprise
—a great throwing-up of earth, and the commencement of a
roadway on which metal rails were laid. What was being
done? The work seemed too extensive for a mere scheme of
drainage. Whatever the undertaking might be, it was now at
a standstill, seeing that old Mr. Mutimer, the owner of the land,
had been in his grave just three days, and no one as yet could
say whether his heir would or would not pursue this novel project. Mrs. Waltham herself felt that the view was spoilt, though her appreciation of nature was not of the keenest, and she would never have thought of objecting to a scheme which would produce money at the cost of the merely beautiful.

'I scarcely think Hubert will continue it,' she was musing to herself. 'He has enough without that, and his tastes don't lie in that direction.'

She had on her lap a local paper, at which she glanced every now and then; but her state of mind was evidently restless. The road on either side of which stood the houses of the village led on to the Manor, and in that direction Mrs. Waltham gazed frequently. The church clock chimed half-past four, and shortly after a rosy-cheeked young girl came at a quick step up the gravelled pathway which made the approach to the Walthams' cottage. She saw Mrs. Waltham at the window, and, when she was near, spoke.

'Is Adela at home?'

'No, Letty; she's gone for a walk with her brother.'

'I'm so sorry!' said the girl, whose voice was as sweet as her face was pretty. 'We wanted her to come for croquet. Yet I was half afraid to come and ask her whilst Mr. Alfred was at home.'

She laughed, and at the same time blushed a little.

'Why should you be afraid of Alfred?' asked Mrs. Waltham graciously.

'Oh, I don't know.'

She turned it off and spoke quickly of another subject.

'How did you like Mr. Wyvern this morning?'

'It was a new vicar, who had been in Wanley but a couple of days, and had this morning officiated for the first time at the church.

'What a voice he has!' was the lady's reply.

'Hasn't he? And such a hairy man! They say he's very learned; but his sermon was very simple—didn't you think so?'

'Yes, I liked it. Only he pronounces certain words strangely.'

'Oh, has Mr. Eldon come yet?' was the young lady's next question.

'He hadn't arrived this morning. Isn't it extraordinary? He must be out of England.'

'But surely Mrs. Eldon knows his address, and he can't be so very far away.'
As she spoke she looked down the pathway by which she had come, and of a sudden her face exhibited alarm.

"Oh, Mrs. Waltham!" she whispered hurriedly. "If Mr. Wyvern isn't coming to see you! I'm afraid to meet him. Do let me pop in and hide till I can get away without being seen."

The front door stood ajar, and the girl at once ran into the house. Mrs. Waltham came into the passage laughing.

"May I go to the top of the stairs?" asked the other nervously. "You know how absurdly shy I am. No, I'll run out into the garden behind; then I can steal round as soon as he comes in."

She escaped, and in a minute or two the new vicar presented himself at the door. A little maid might well have some apprehension in facing him, for Mr. Wyvern was of vast proportions and leonine in aspect. With the exception of one ungloved hand and the scant proportions of his face which were not hidden by hair, he was wholly black in hue; an enormous beard, the colour of jet, concealed the linen about his throat, and a veritable mane, dark as night, fell upon his shoulders. His features were not ill-matched with this sable garniture; their expression was a fixed severity; his eye regarded you with stern scrutiny, and passed from the examination to a melancholy reflectiveness. Yet his appearance was suggestive of anything but ill-nature; contradictory though it may seem, the face was a pleasant one, inviting to confidence, to respect; if he could only have smiled, the tender humanity which lurked in the lines of his countenance would have become evident. His age was probably a little short of fifty.

A servant replied to his knock, and, after falling back in a momentary alarm, introduced him to the sitting-room. He took Mrs. Waltham's hand silently, fixed upon her the full orbs of his dark eyes, and then, whilst still retaining her fingers, looked thoughtfully about the room. It was a pleasant little parlour, with many an evidence of refinement in those who occupied it. Mr. Wyvern showed something like a look of satisfaction. He seated himself, and the chair creaked ominously beneath him. Then he again scrutinised Mrs. Waltham.

She was a lady of fair complexion, with a double chin. Her dress suggested elegant tastes, and her hand was as smooth and delicate as a lady's should be. A long gold chain descended from her neck to the watch-pocket at her waist, and her fingers exhibited several rings. She bore the reverend gentleman's scrutiny with modest grace, almost as if it flattered her. And