An English Communist.

By J. Hain Friswell, Author of 'The Gentle Life.'

There are only two powers now to be feared in Society—they are the Church and the Secret Societies or Mary Anne.—Disraeli's *Lothair*.

The recent terrible events in Paris, which in their inception and execution both are unparalleled, and as Mr. Gladstone asserts only to be fully designated by the eloquence of silence, have been described by some as the 'last kick of the Commune.' Whether they be indeed the last or the first, they recall a conversation and experience which may here be fitly recorded.

The year is 1870; the hot summer blazing into autumn; the streets untidy and dusty, very far from fresh, somewhat jaded in fact, and not over-well swept; in the early morning, very hot too, although the street-sweepers and water-carts have been their due rounds. The carts, with a heavy lumbering noise, a splash and a gush, which awoke the sleepers who were wise enough to have their windows open, emptied themselves so vigorously that two men at a pump by the market-place, who looked like two tall half-melted navvies who had been unwillingly reduced to parish work, declared that the water was like a half-quartern of gin in 'a two-out glass, no sooner in than it was out agin,' and every now and then struck work to mop their faces. Little boys sat carelessly on the kerb-stones to let the splashing water run over them, and the water itself was dashed upon the warm stones in the stupid, wasteful English fashion, and washed away as much of the concrete as it could, and then evaporated in an efficient and very quick way.

The only cool people in the street were the sellers of watercresses, who with an old chair, an old tea-tray, and an inverted basket, held a kind of bazaar for green meat, and were careful to use one bunch as an asperge to sprinkle the rest, and so kept a few paving stones damp around them. But the 'creases' themselves had run 'spindly' and were dry and yellowish, and not even the tempting cry of 'here's your fine fresh brown 'uns' caused the slipshod urchins to buy. The connoisseurs in 'creases' prefer the dark shining leaves of the young

watercress in spring; hence the term of 'brown 'uns.' But it was far too late in the season for them.

The place was Greville Street, Hatton Garden; the house once a very handsome one when old city merchants dwelt in the 'garden' close to it, and some remnants of the nobility still lingered about the quarter named from Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke. The street had long been left to wild tribes of workmen, and a colony of Italian glass-workers, mathematical instrument makers, silverers, gilders, looking-glass makers, tube blowers, image vendors, modellers, makers of decorations for cornices and ceilings, and other artists, had settled in the quarter and made it what it was fitly called—little Italy. Here and there a French basket-maker had taken a huge house and filled it from the top to the bottom with baskets, which were delivered in gigantic bnudles neatly sewn up in canvas, and which reached from the pavement to the top of the first-floor window.

The insides of these bundles were wondrous specimens of 'packing.' For instance, a wicker cradle as big as that which contained the infant Hercules—for English babies run large—held within it many various sizes down to the tiniest doll's cradle; and baskets followed the same rule until they were small enough to be stuffed compactly with wicker rattles, which with a piece of bent tin in them emitted strange noises like the ghost of a sheep bell. These huge parcels took certain gentlemen in blouses—MM. Achille, Gustave, Arsène, and others—a whole day to unpack, and during this pleasant operation, A. G. and A., who were wildly republican, but devoted to the ladies as deeply as the gayest courtier in the time of Louis XIV., showed their white teeth, smoothed their black moustaches, and smiled fondly and gallantly upon any 'Misse' who passed by.

Inside one of these tall houses, in a back room smelling of vinegar and as cool as it well could be, sat two men: one was an English gentleman, the other an Englishman too, of the 'base mechanic sort,' as some of the superfine swells in Shakespeare's play are made bitterly and satirically to say. The sick man was of the base sort—if we dare apply that to any class; that is, he got his living by a handicraft which as surely as it fed him, so surely brought him his death. He knew that, and we knew it too. It was as certain as statistics. The little boy who was apprenticed to it would have ten or it may be twenty years deducted from the sum of his young life, and would be badly paid after all. He was a water-gilder, an occupation fast dying out, as electro-gilding, which is not half as good they say, has superseded it. When we have anything good we have to pay for it.

The occupation of the 'base mechanic'—the notion of a man losing his life by inches and yet being base, although all the while he was making very beautiful things, is not pleasant—would of course account for two or three very beautiful silver vases, parcel-gilt, of excellent art, and glowing inside with a deep reflected red (a colour which made one

understand why the Scotch called gold the 'red siller,' and old ballads talk about the red red gold), and on the outside with a moonlight glory of fine polish, picked out with lighter gilding.

The occupation of the invalid would also account for the pallor of his face, the partial toothlessness of his jaws, though the man was young, the blue marks under his eyes and round his lips, and the continual trembling of his limbs. Mercury had done its work upon him, and a hacking cough which shook and tore him to pieces was finishing him as he sat.

He looked with satisfaction at the vases. 'Them's the last,' he said to his guest and friend. 'I give Mr. Jonson my word, and I worked till I done it. It's finished me though.'

'Mr. Jonson,' said his friend, taking up one of the cups daintily, 'why they have a coronet on them, and, by the way, the arms and supporters of the Earl of Mudford—*Virtus sola nobilitas*.'

'That's the motto. Mr. Jonson is the silversmith; I only know his name in it. What does that mean?'

'Virtue is the only nobility. Virtus means strength as well, sometimes valour.'

'Ah! read it that way. If all's true of Lord Mudford it won't suit the other way. He's strong enough and as big as a bull; he saw me to give me some directions, and spoke to me as if I was dirt.'

'It's his way; he is a good fellow enough, I hear, but rather wild.'

'I wish them noblemen wouldn't fancy every poor man was deaf. He split my poor head open a'most, but I give him my word and I done it.'

It was satisfactory to the poor man this finishing of his last work, for, base as he was, he was honourable.

'You mustn't talk too much,' said his companion. 'Be quiet and you will be better. When I picked you up in the street a fortnight ago, I never thought to see you so well as you are. It was a cold night then—one of those sudden cold nights that we sometimes have in summer, and the change from your hot workshop was too much for your lungs, poor fellow.'

'Very kind of you, sir; very kind.'

'Yes, a fellow-feeling you see; I had been nearly as bad.'

The conversation was here interrupted by an Italian who, swarthy, black-headed, and full of health, with a huge lettuce in one hand and a flask of oil in his pocket, opened the door gently and took off his cap politely as he entered. '*L' ho apportata*,' said he, putting down the lettuce, 'we will make salad. Here is something also.' He placed a little packet on the table by the side of the dying man. 'From the society,' he said. 'We had a meeting, and I opened to them your case.'

'I won't touch it. I have kept at work and don't want it.'

The Italian waved his hand. 'You are a good workman, and we

know our duty' said he. 'If not you, yet for the signora—she will need it, Mister Walsh.'

The water-gilder sighed and let the parcel lie.

'Madre Natura takes care of her children,' said Giuseppe softly with a smile, 'which is more than the State does.'

He moved about the room, found a basin, rinsed the lettuce, mixed oil, vinegar, and sugar, tasted the mixture, and cutting the lettuce into shreds, pronounced the salad capital; then saying, '*Avrete del vino e della latte*,' went out to get those articles.

'He's a good Samaritan,' said the gentleman with a smile. 'I suppose in this Italian quarter you like salads and foreign dishes.'

'We get used to them.'

'And to other things—to Madre Natura, for instance; I have heard about it. What is that?'

'A great society which has branches all over the world. You will hear about it soon. Do you know the name of Mary Anne?'

'Not meaning a woman? Yes, I have just heard about it and that is all; in Sheffield and elsewhere.'

'At Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, down here; in New York, Paris, Berlin, and at San Francisco, Melbourne, and Victoria; for the matter of that, all over the world.'

'A large society. What does it mean?'

'Labour against capital, that's *all*,' said the water-gilder in a whisper, for his voice was weak.

'You have to fight with a giant,' answered his companion.

'And we shall beat; at least I think I shall be out of the struggle soon enough, but I leave a boy who may come after me. It will be better for him.'

'*Del vino*,' cried the bass voice of the Italian, bringing some thin white wine, cheap enough in those quarters, and mixed with water very delicious in the hot weather.

A Samaritan indeed, for he brought oil and wine, and declaring that he meant to take a holiday, '*Avremo vacanza, amico mio*,' he said to the poor sick fellow, constituted himself his watcher, took the place of the Englishman who went away sadly, hardly expecting to see the poor water-gilder again.

As it was, however, he lingered on some weeks, and from conversations between him and his visitor, and many explanations from Giuseppe and one of the French basket-makers from over the way, certain truths were picked up which are here given.

The kindness of these men, foreigners and exiles, both of whom had fought in the streets of Paris or of Naples, and to whom revolution was a creed, was remarkable. They were as tender as their creed, according to some, was cruel and wild. The difficulty which society will have in dealing with such political regenerators is that theirs is not the conspiracy of bad men for a mere chimerical object selfish in its

end, but the combination of good men driven to despair at the present state of society, for an end which the world holds to be Utopian, but which they believe to be in their grasp.

Here, then, follow some of their sentences. Edward Walsh, the water-gilder, a good sound English workman, who, whether he has culture or not, whether his education be defective, or he has imbibed some sweetness and light, was an excellent workman, and had died at an early age, leaving his wife and child—through no fault of his own—almost at the mercy of the world. Three men were left: the guest who first sat by Walsh's side when the narrative commences, Arsène the basket-maker, and Giuseppe the Italian modeller, his decent black clothes somewhat whitened in patches with plaster of Paris, as if it oozed out of his pores or dusted from his finger-nails. These after the funeral are debating the matter.

'The service is very simple, and the Padre was a good kind gentleman, but that won't bring Walsh back to his family or do any good for him.' So far the Italian.

'No. We have grown tired of you gentlemen and your religion. We take our wives to our bosoms and put our dead in earth without forms or priest. Christianity is very pretty, very touching sometimes, but for the world, look you there, *m'sieur*, it is exploded.'

'*Senza dubbio*,' said Giuseppe. 'The time has past for it. We have had men of genius who loved it, men of science who admired it: Dante, Galileo, they were its friends—it persecuted and condemned them.'

'The priesthood did: the Church if you like, not the faith.'

'We make no difference, *nous autres*. Here am I; look at me, Arsène Dubois, I loved the faith; it was sweet in my childhood. I have outlived it. What Church does good? Not even to the few who love it, the rich, the comfortable, as you call them. And remember beneath them are the thousands of workers who are strange or antagonistic to it; why these bear the same relation to what they call here the "upper crust" of society as the body of one of your cakes of Christmas does to the thin sugar which makes it look white and pretty on the top.'

'And you have not made them Christian in eighteen centuries. The sugar does not mix; it thinks itself superior to the cake, and yet the cake has all the goodness; is all the food, I mean—produces everything like the workers. And these, my faith, they live in Paris, Berlin, New York, or Manchester, nine and ten in a room, and die like this poor Walsh. Christianity has failed.'

'No; we have failed in making our Christianity real. What would you have?'

'Law!'

'Law; why *that* is not justice even in England, where it is best adminstered.'

'Not lawyer's law, good sir, but social law,' answered Arsène, 'administered by society—"a supreme headship chosen by other societies"—that is what one of our English brethren writes.'

'*Si, si.* The Commune. All the good for the good of all. Get thee behind me, priests, kings, nobles! What have you done in your twenty centuries since Christ came and preached the true religion of the Commune, "Love one another"? Why, sirs, they have picked out the best places, the parks, the houses, the carriages, the very ships, rivers, lakes, and waters; they have provided for their families, they have taken hold of the Signor Christ Himself and turned His coat inside out. And during this while Humanity has worked for them or starved and died.'

'It is so,' said the Frenchman. 'Government by the upper classes has failed. We do not blame them; they saw only as far as they could. You have a word which is very expressive; you gentlemen are Conservatives, you would *conserver toutes les choses*—keep things as they are. Well, for you it is very good. It means the Universities, the Church, the army, fine places and parks; and all nice things, the lamb, the turbot, and the lobster; poetry, fine art, and splendid emotions, *c'est ça*; but for others, for us, it means little children of four destroying their lives by dipping matches, gangs of boys and girls driven for miles to weed your fields at half-a-crown a week; labourers who rear the lambs paid at nine or twelve shillings; death in the frozen sea for the man who catches the lobster and the turbot, and half-a-crown a day for self, boat, and peril, while the fishmonger makes a great fortune, and plants a paradise or builds a palace; poverty and hard work for the poet, the paper maker, and the printer of your books, and the fate of Edward Walsh for the preparer of fine art. This is a rough outline of our view. As a rule it is a true one, though there may be exceptions.'

'*Vero è vero!* True by the good God who has suffered all this, that is, for ninety out of a hundred. Some giants fight their way upwards, but the flock dies as its fathers.'

'Now we don't hate you—we did once—we could have slain all of you, *vous autres*, but we do not wish so now. But look you, we will remove you.'

'Who will?'

'*Madre Natura.* The Commune, the Contrat Social. Is it not time to shuffle the cards?'

'For from the workers,' continued Arsène, 'in brain or by hand—and you are one of these and should be one of us—come all things. There are exceptions, you say. None, not enough to prove the rule. The steam plough, the plough itself, the spade, the seeds that are sown, the breeding of cattle, all proceed from the brains of the masses, and are paid for by the money of the masses. The pictures which adorn your walls, the books which teach you how to live, how to die, how to pray, the very outwork and defence of your religion, all come from the brains of the workers, poor students often starving and neglected; the very faith

you inherit arose from One poor and neglected, who was crucified as a malefactor, and the very theories by which you administer your wealth from the solitary students of political economy who were neglected and laughed at till you found their theories of use.'

'*Bravo!* Arsène my son.'

'Now we have got tired of all that; we have put it aside as useless; others may take it up, a religion which binds us to suffer, and not to redress wrong.'

'Does it do that? The Church will tell you very differently.'

'Bah! the Church she is dead; we have no Church, we live for Humanity. We propose to redistribute wealth, to reward labour, to punish idleness and over-luxury. Instead of one being educated and despising others, all shall be educated and none despised. We live no longer for individual selfishness, but for Humanity.'

'You are Comtists then; you worship the divine Auguste.'

'Not as divine; he was one of us. We worship what he worshipped in his poor ideal, the race, humanity, Madre Natura, all the good for the good of all, as one of your English said.'

'But what becomes of trade, society, law, physic, and divinity?'

'Ah, my friend, you have a long way to go. What becomes of our sons that we furnished for your armies and your footmen, our daughters who were your mistresses or servants, when the whole Society shall move round you, in every city in France, Germany, Italy, America, and quietly dispossess you? We will not slay you if you are quiet—we will remove you.'

'You are dreaming. How many have you?'

'Three millions already, and each one an apostle. Nothing stands in our way. You remember Mr. Broadhead and Sheffield.'

'A detestable murderer——'

'An agent of the great Society, not very wise perhaps, but clear about his duty and his way. We find that it is of no use to appeal to religion, to faith, to patriotism, to learning, to culture, to government by the rich. These do not stop wars nor baby murders, not the death and degradation of millions. We will and we can. We have a president in every country, secretaries in every town, members everywhere. We help our poor—you saw Giuseppe bring money to poor Walsh; you would give him dry bread and the workhouse. Your religion encourages the scamp and the beggar, and gives away at least the half of seven millions of gold sovereigns in London alone, to the cheat and the idler. Our Society would make them work or would let them starve. You allow millions of children in your fields and streets to grow up to vice and ignorance; Mary Anne would take and teach them. At the same time she is pitiless to those that stand in her way. She says, "Move on or I will crush you."'

'A dreadful sentence to thousands who are innocent.'

'Machinery is very cruel to those that are in its way; but as for

removal of incumbrances a certain Voice said, "It hath borne no fruit; cut it down, why cumbreth it the ground."'

'It also said, "Come unto me, ye that are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."'

'Which priests deny. We have few prayers but our labour, but these prayers clothe all, feed all, and yet we are denied acceptance into every Church; so closely are their doors barred in by dogmas. But enough. Let those who like the churches take them. It is a free fight with us; we have done with Faith, we fight only for Humanity. Let heaven lie beyond this earth as it may, why should it be purchased—and even then denied—by misery and degradation here? We will make the world better than it is.'

'What a cruel conspiracy!'

'As cruel as the surgeon's knife, which by removing a small portion—say the scalp if you like—gives health to the whole body. Join us; we are not cruel, but we are tired of so much talk and so little action of reforms which always result in greater comfort for the rich and more work for the poor; of faith which spreads wings of gold, and utters golden words, but has feet of lead; of the press which makes great promises and ends in being the reporter of court circulars, grand doings, cricket matches, horse races, and the grand palaver club, and yet does nothing of patriots who are silenced by a place. All have failed—now we workmen, the creators of all, come forward, no longer to be governed but to govern all. We number three million souls.'

'If we have any, *Fratel mio;* but we leave that to others; we take care only of the body and the mind; we who understand our principles, simple and wise as they are, and who mean to enforce them. You will hear no doubt of our struggles; you will hear us called harsh names, for in brushing the butterflies away we shall dust their wings; thousands of us may die, but we do that every day.

'We are used to it, *Fratello*,' said Giuseppe, giving him an admiring thump on his back. 'We shall die nobly.'

'And whatever society may say, *we* shall not fail, any more than do the nation of ants in South America, which to cross a stream bury their millions in the river that they pass.'

Thus ended our talk for that time, and after events have given it importance. I may return again to this subject.