

TALK ABOUT SOCIALISM

WITH AN OLD SHOPMATE.

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***START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TALK ABOUT
SOCIALISM WITH AN OLD
SHOPMATE***

Transcribed from the 1800's Religious Tract Society pamphlet by David Price,
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TALK ABOUT SOCIALISM WITH AN OLD SHOPMATE.

THE RELIGIOUS TRACT SOCIETY, INSTITUTED 1799.
56, PATERNOSTER ROW, AND 65, ST. PAUL'S CHURCHYARD.

Thinks I to myself the other sabbath afternoon, as I sat alone with my Bible before me—thinks I to myself, that was a comforting text in God's holy word that our minister preached from this morning; "All things work together for good to them that love God:" and a capital sermon it was, too, that he gave us; for though it cut me to the heart on account of my sins, it brought the tears into my eyes, on account of God's mercy and grace.

Well, I read the chapter that the text was taken from all to myself; for my Nancy was gone to public worship, and I was left to take care of the house, and our little Mary, and the young one in the cradle. The house was clean and tidy, and everything was quiet, and I felt happy like. Trust me for having as many cares as my neighbours; a poor man ought not to expect to be without them, nor, for the matter of that, a rich man neither: but I felt happy, and though I said nothing, my heart thanked God.

Thinks I to myself, we are bad enough as it is; ay, the very best of us; but if places of worship were to be shut up, and we had no ministers to preach to us, and had no Bibles to read, we should be a deal worse than we are: and this set me a thinking about the blessing of the sabbath day, and the comfort of prayer, and the peace of mind there is in thinking of the salvation of Christ, and the promises of God. Not that I can always get the comfort from them as I could wish, for I am a poor ignorant creature, and the turn of a straw is enough, at times, to turn my thoughts from good things to bad. But I felt, as I said, happy like in the quietness that a God fearing man enjoys on the sabbath day, and in the peace of that religion in which my dear father and mother before me had lived and died; and I was determined, with God's help, to stick to it, while I had any breath in my body. Thinks I, there is many of us that have sadly stood in our own light, in neglecting the sabbath and holy things. What fools we are to cheat ourselves as we do! When we run after our follies, the jack o' lanterns that

dance before us, and lead us astray, no wonder that we get into the mire; “but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint,” Isaiah xl. 31.

As I sat musing in this way over my Bible, the door-way was darkened a little, all on a sudden; so I lifted up my head, and there I saw Tom Fletcher with a lot of books in his hand.

Tom was once a shopmate of mine; and, though I never took him to be a very wise man, nor over bright in his upper story, yet, for all that, he was better than many. He had brought his books on purpose to talk to me about them. In a minute or two we were in the thick of them.

Says he, “I have not seen you for some time; and since you and I met, I have joined the Socialists.” “Joined who?” says I. “Why,” says he, “the Socialists;” and with that he told me all about it. By his account it seemed that the world had been going round the wrong way ever since it was made, but the Socialists were going to put matters to rights again. “Just shut up your Bible,” says he, “and I will show you my books.”

Now I had heard of the Socialists before, and as I had not the best opinion of them, I thought my Bible quite as good, and a pretty deal better than their books. “Tom,” says I, “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. If I shut my Bible, you are not likely to open as good a book, I have a notion; so we had better let well alone.” But Tom was very pressing; and so, putting his books on the table, he began to tell me, that the Socialists had no object in the world but the good of mankind; that everything had been for ages, and now was, all sixes and sevens; and that matters were not likely to be mended, till, burning our Bibles, and putting aside religion, and all our other fanciful notions, we became Socialists.

Thinks I to myself, Great cry and little wool, Tom; but as I had never looked into any of the books of the Socialists, I picked up the one that lay at the top, and turned over a few pages, dipping here and there.

I suppose the colour came into my cheeks; for Tom looked hard at me. “Tom,” says I, “if so be that I haven’t been walking on my head instead of my heels all the days of my life, and if I know black from white, why then this book of yours

is an indecent and abominable book, that I should be ashamed to put into any body's hand. Is it possible that Tom Fletcher, my old shopmate, can hold—" "Oh," says Tom, looking as sharp as a hawk at the book in my hand, "oh," says he, "I didn't mean you to see that! I thought I had put that number a one side. I don't hold exactly with it." "Don't hold exactly with it!" says I; "why it's no more fit to be touched than a tarred stick. If the rest of your books are like it, a precious lot they must be altogether."

Tom looked a little queerish, as if he was ashamed of the book and of himself too. Thinks I to myself, Now's my time to have a rap at him; for though I feel kindly to him, yet as he seems to want it, a rap on the knuckles mayhap will do him good.

"And so, Tom," says I, "this is one of the books of the Socialists, is it? One of the books that you want to recommend to me? Now tell me if you really think in your heart and conscience that that book is fit to be read by anybody?"

Tom looked first one way, then another; he was all abroad. At last, says he, "I meant to burn that book." "Glad to hear it," says I; so taking up the book, with his consent, I poked it between the bars of the grate, and a rare blaze it made, flaring half way up to the mantel piece, giving more light to the world than it had ever done before, or ever would have done in any other way.

Says I to Tom, when the filthy book was burned, says I, "Tom, when a man goes to market to buy a cheese, and the cheesemonger pushes in his borer that he may taste it, if he doesn't like the bit that he bores out, it sets him against the whole cheese; for he naturally expects that one is like the other. Now it is just the same with your books: birds of a feather, you know, flock together; and as one of them has turned out to be a black crow, I hardly expect to find the rest of 'em to be white pigeons."

Well, I took up all his books, one after another: some things in them I did understand and some I did'nt; for there was so much about *impressions*, and *principles*, and *institutions*, and *propensities* and *organizations* that it flustered me. It was clear that a longer head than mine had been concerned in getting 'em up; so all that I could do was to try to get at some of the marrow of them here and there.

I'm not over clever at book learning, but still I had gumption enough to make out

a few points that settled my opinion about Socialism. I saw, or thought I saw, that the god of the Socialists was only a "Cause of all existences;" that he never troubled his head about us, and that we ought never to trouble our heads about him. That, in fact, there was no such God, in the Socialists' opinion, as the gracious Almighty Being whom Christians worship.

I saw, too, that Socialists believed the Bible to be a lie, trumped up to keep silly people in bondage: that marriage was considered "the greatest crime against nature," that ought to be done away with; that theft, adultery, blasphemy, and murder were no crimes, for man was "not a responsible being;" he was "neither to be blamed or praised, rewarded or punished for either his thoughts, feelings, or actions;" that death was "simply a change of one organization for another;" and that the Christian notions of hell, heaven, and hereafter were all a bag full of moonshine.

Now it grieved me that an old shopmate of mine should have tumbled into such a bog hole as Socialism; but thinks I, mayhap, after all, he has only been led out of the way by sharper fellows than himself, and doesn't above half believe the juggling claptraps that are printed in his books; so I said to him, "Tom, look at me and answer me this question, Do you believe that there is a God?" Tom blinked, and shuffled, and stammered, and opened one of the books and read a bit about "nature," and a "first cause," and "a general principle," and a "supreme power," and "an external cause of all existence," and an "all pervading cause of motion and change;" but I stopped him at once.

"Tom," said I, "you may spare yourself the trouble of running over that long rigmarole; for I'm not to have dust flung in my eyes in that way. I do not want to know what *your book says*, but what *you believe*; so answer my question. A handful of good grain is better than a bushel of chaff, and a yes or a no can be understood by any body. Do you believe that there is a gracious and merciful God, that you are bound to fear and to love with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength, to worship him, to give him thanks, to put your whole trust in him, to call upon him, to honour his holy name and his word, and to serve him truly all the days of your life?"

I saw that whether Tom said yes or no, it was all one, for he didn't know which to say. It suited him better to read to me out of his books than it did to answer my questions; but I asked him another question. "Tom," says I, "do you really believe that the Bible is a lie? You don't doubt the history of England, the

history of Rome, and the history of Greece, and these have never been kept with half the care, nor gone through a tenth part of the sifting that the Bible has. Do you really believe that the Bible is a lie?" Tom had not the boldness to say that he did; and I felt sure in my heart that he did not think it was. "Tom," says I, "are you so far gone as to think that marriage is a foolish and wicked institution? I thought your sister was going to be married; is it all off, then, or is she to disgrace you and her family?"

This question twisted Tom as much as the last, and I saw that I was about as likely to get a badger out of his hole, as to get an answer from him. "Well," says I, "Tom, I'll say nothing about your sister, if its disagreeable, but ask you another question instead. Have you so little uprightness left in your deceived heart as to suppose that theft, adultery, blasphemy, and murder are no reproach to a man; and that any one may set up the trade of a robber on the highway, and justify himself by saying that he cannot help it, for 'his character is formed for him by circumstances?'"

Tom was not at all staunch; he did not stick up like one that believes and has confidence in what he says. "Tom," says I, "t'other day a loaded cart was standing in the road half way up Gravelly Hill, with the wheels scotched, when a mischievous lad knocked the stones from under the wheels, and away went the loaded cart, over his foot, rattling down the hill, clearing every thing before it. The young urchin was half frightened out of his wits; he set the cart off easily enough, but not the whole neighbourhood could stop it. Now I take it, Tom, that the young rapsallion played just the same game as the Socialists are playing, with this difference, that the wheel of the cart only went over his toes, whereas the mischief that the Socialists are setting on foot will in the long run, go over their own necks."

Tom kept fumbling at his books, not knowing what to be at. He wanted somebody to back him. He believed his books just as much, and no more, than he would have believed any other tale of a tub, told him by a cleverer fellow than himself.

"Tom," says I, "when a man once turns his back upon God, there is no folly and no sin that he may not be led to commit. You have gone a long way, and I'm sorry for it; but I hardly think you are gone as far as your famous books will take you. Speak up now like a man, and tell me, have you been fooled into the belief that there is no hereafter?—no hell, and no heaven?"

At this Tom looked like any thing but a conjurer. At length he said that if I would read more of his books I should understand them better than I did.

“Read your books, Tom!” says I, “I should just as soon think of taking a dose of arsenic. A pretty deal rather had I walk barefoot through Boxley Bog, and many a better man than me has been stuck fast there,—a pretty deal rather had I do that, than turn Socialist. If I wanted to be worse than I am, to deprive myself of all hope, and to plunge myself into despair, I couldn’t do a better thing than read your trumpery; but as it is, I will have nothing to do with it. Tom,” says I, “you are no fool in driving a bargain: you would not be persuaded to exchange a quartern loaf for a handful of sawdust. Now Socialism takes away from a Christian man the Bible that comforts him, the sabbath that is his delight, the God that he worships, the Saviour that died for him, and the heaven that he hopes for: tell me, then, Tom, what does it give him in return?”

If ever poor fellow was confounded, it was Tom Fletcher. Had he been sitting on a furze bush, he could hardly have been more fidgetty. He got out a few words, but they were very scarce and a long way apart; and as he could’nt well put ’em together, no wonder that I can’t.

Well, I had only been firing at him, as it were, a pop, now and then, from a long way off, but now I was determined to bear upon him all at once.

“It isn’t for me, Tom,” says I, “that am not what I ought to be by a great deal—it isn’t for me, knowing as I do a little of the wickedness of my own heart, to deal out fire and brimstone against my fellow sinners, and to pretend that I am white as snow and they as black as soot; but for all that, Tom, we may be too tender with one another. If I see an adder lying in a thoroughfare where he may sting the passer by, I’m bound to disable him; and if I see a mad dog, foaming at the mouth, running through the crowded street, I’m bound, if I can, to kill him. Now the adder and the mad dog are not likely to do half the mischief that your books are, and therefore I hold up both my hands, and cry out aloud against them.

“Look you,” says I, “Tom, there lies the Bible. It condemns every thing that is evil, even every sinful thought, and upholds every thing that is good. It teaches me to fear God, and to love my neighbour; and tells me, sinner as I am, that there is mercy for me through Jesus Christ who died for sinners. It gives me comfort in life, it promises me support in death, and holds up before me the bright prospect of a happy eternity; and it has done this for thousands who have left this

world in peace, and who are now, as I believe, in a world of glory.

“And there, Tom, be your wretched books, which tell me, that is, if I at all understand them, that there is no God; that the Bible is a lie; that marriage is a foolish institution; that men ought to live just as they think proper; that theft, adultery, blasphemy and murder are no crimes; that there is neither hell nor heaven; and that it is idle to dream of a hereafter.

“If I know my own heart, Tom, or even any part of it, I wouldn't knowingly say a cruel thing of a butcher's dog; but this I will say, that I should as soon expect to be taught manners by a Hottentot, cleanliness by a sweep, honesty by a highwayman, and godliness by a heathen, as to be made either wiser, better, holier, or happier by having any thing to do with Socialism. But what says that book? ‘The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works,’ Titus ii. 11–14.”

Never did a poor fellow caught in the fact of robbing a hen-roost, slink away in a more humble, chopfallen spirit than poor Tom Fletcher did. Whether he will ever bring me another batch of his Socialism books or not, I can't tell; but if he does, the first question that I shall ask him will be this, What have you got to offer me in exchange for the consolations of my Bible, the comfort of prayer, the peace of the sabbath, the goodness of God, the mercy of the Redeemer, and the never-ending joys of heaven? And never till he gives me something like a reasonable answer will I ever open another of his books on Socialism.

HYMN.

God, in the gospel of his Son,
Makes his eternal counsels known;
'Tis here his richest mercy shines,
And truth is drawn in fairest lines.

Here sinners of an humble frame,
May taste his grace and learn his name;
'Tis writ in characters of blood,
Severely just, immensely good.

Wisdom its dictates here imparts,
To form our minds, to cheer our hearts;
Its influence makes the sinner live,
It bids the drooping saint revive.

Our raging passions it controls,
And comfort yields to contrite souls;
It brings a better world in view,
And guides us all our journey through.

May this bless'd volume ever lie
Close to my heart, and near my eye,
Till life's last hour my soul engage,
And be my chosen heritage!

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