A LETTER

RELATING TO

THE CASE OF THE

WALSALL ANARCHISTS,

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To the Editor of "Freedom."

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THOUGH I was not present at the meeting of Nov. 11, held at South Place Institute in remembrance of the Chicago and Walsall Anarchists, I should like to write a few lines to express my protest also against the sentences passed in both instances. I think it, however, a mistake to rest our case too entirely on the plea that our comrades of Chicago or of Walsall were the victims of police plots. We all know that there is plenty of police dodgery of that kind; and that *agents provocateurs* are a recognised part of our judicial system; and in the case of our Walsall friends there is a probability, amounting with some of us to a certainty, that they were acted upon in this way. At the same time it does not appear that there is any absolutely conclusive evidence to that effect, of such a character as can be presented and made convincing to the public; and in general it would be absurd, and would only weaken our position, to speak as if none of the Anarchist party ever contemplated the use of violence; because it is evident that if they are drawn into the thing in any way through the intrigues of the party of so-called "law and order," that can only be because they have already in some degree contemplated the idea.

No, I think our position is made much stronger if, granting that violence was (however vaguely) contemplated in both these cases, we draw the conclusions which follow from that fact. For here, in both these instances, we have men of the most gentle, humane, and peaceable disposition concerned. The characters of the Chicago Anarchists have been before the world now some years, and are well known in that respect. With regard to our Walsall comrades the same may certainly be said of two of them, of whom I have some knowledge; and of the remaining two, others may be able to speak.

I knew Fred Charles and saw him constantly at one time for a year or more, and I can safely say that a more generous, noble and tenderhearted man I have seldom, if ever, met.

He is the kind of man that would not hurt a fly if he could help it. I have known him, and so no doubt have many of your readers, give his last penny away to a comrade in distress.;—and not to a comrade merely in the narrower sense of the word, but to anyone who was in worse need than himself he would practically give what he had. This almost amounted to a fault with him, because he would surrender his own means of livelihood, and sometimes his confidence, to people who were unworthy—at any rate of the latter—and so lay himself open to the snare of nursing a snake in his bosom. But what a fault—if fault it be—

what an admirable fault in these days when the highest virtue preached by the pharisaic and comfortable classes to the mass of the people is a mean petty calculating and self-regarding *Thrift!*

There was no Thrift of that kind about Charles; but he lived simply and roughly enough, because he wanted all he had for others and for the Cause. His soul was wounded deeply by what he saw of the sufferings of the people, and more than once he said to me "If I did not think that matters could be mended soon, I would not care to live another hour"—or words to that effect.

With Joe Deakin it was the same. I did not know much of him personally; but his old father—whom I saw a short while ago, and who has been overwhelmed with grief at his son's long sentence—was never tired of telling me of his son's loving and gentle character: his devotion and kindness to his parents, his considerateness and thoughtfulness; and his personal friends give just the same account of him. Nor could you fail to see these characteristics in his physiognomy—which is largely that of an idealist.

And both these men, Charles and Deakin, were well up in literature. They were men of well furnished brains who had thought out for themselves the problems of the day. Charles was an omnivorous reader—including French and German—and a bit of a philosopher. And of Deakin one of his friends said "He never let slip anything in the literature of the new movement—every new publication, whether in England or America, he made a note of and passed in review somehow or other."

Now I think the point is that here we have two men of whom one cannot have the slightest hesitation in saying that they were men of considerable culture and of the most gentle disposition—by nature therefore averse to violence and destruction—still under suspicion of resorting to or contemplating the use of explosives, in the simple extremity of their desperation.

What more serious indictment of existing society and institutions could we have than this? When society drives its best men to such extremity, how rotten indeed must it be! Surely, if the ruling powers and authorities have any sense left in their heads, these things must give them pause. Is it strange, almost incredible, that men such as I have described should contemplate such methods,—then that strangeness and incredibility is exactly the measure of the enormity of the crime of which their action accuses society. So obvious is this conclusion that 'respectability' as a rule on these occasions refuses to believe, or pretends to disbelieve, that the accused revolutionary can possibly be of the type indicated. It sets him down as a wild beast, a maniac, or as a brutal and ignorant product of its own slums—yet we know very well that, though true in some cases, this is by no means always so. Not only in the cases of the Chicago and Walsall Anarchists, but in scores and hundreds of instances during these years all over Russia, the continent of Europe, Britain and the United States, it has been and is some of the most thoughtful and sensitive men and women who have signalised their opinion of the situation by their approval of acts of the kind in question.

And even from the point of view of the ruling classes themselves, what other conclusion can be drawn? If society characterises such acts as wrong and wicked

in the last degree, it has to ask itself the question how it comes about that men of otherwise blameless lives, of tender feelings and of balanced clear brains, can all of a sudden turn about to contemplate these wild crimes. If the explanation is that the men have gone mad, then society cannot but also see that on it lies the responsibility of having driven them mad; or if it still holds to it that the crimes indicate nothing but the working of brutal revengefulness, then it has to explain how it is that its own acts have incited so violent a passion in men by nature unrevengeful.

No, there remains but one conclusion—there can be but one conclusion—namely that the existing society, with its rulers and governing classes, by such events as these stands condemned. The best it can do is to rub its eyes and try for once to look facts in the face, removing from before itself the thick veil of hypocrisies through which it usually, as from an immeasurable distance, surveys the sufferings of the mass of the people—lest indeed if it do not tackle the matter seriously, and quickly too, it be hurried along to inevitable retribution and destruction.

I am therefore glad to protest against the 'outrageous sentences' passed on our Walsall friends—not from the mere point of view (true though it may be) that the latter are victims of a police plot; but because even without any police plot the sentences are unjust—because in fact the very circumstances of the case prove that society itself is the criminal and that on it lies the chief blame; and that until the classes in power show themselves genuinely anxious to reform the frightful evils which exist, they can hardly—even from their own point of view—condemn very severely the men who insist by extreme methods in calling attention to the existence of these evils.

As far as the evidence in the Walsall case was concerned I think myself that it showed clearly enough that there were the beginnings of a conspiracy to use explosives, but also equally clearly that the conspiracy, for some reason or other, was abandoned at an early stage of the proceedings. Under these circumstances the sentences of ten years' penal servitude were barbarous in their severity, and can only be explained by the panic fear which had seized upon Authority's evil conscience at that time.

EDWARD CARPENTER.

Nov. 25th, 1892.