

## AN ITALIAN SOCIALIST'S NOVEL.\*

By VERNON LEE.

The distinguished Italian poet, thus appropriately introduced to English readers by the niece of Rossetti and grand-daughter of Madox Brown has explained the title of this novel by reference to its dramatis personae. They should admonish us, by the cruel uselessness of their obscure efforts and sufferings, of the waste of useful possibilities which goes on wholesale in our blind and rudimentary civilisation.

"He was a characteristic type of our period," writes Signor Cena of his hero, "one of those creatures all sensitiveness and intelligence, whom the accident of birth exposes to be inexorably crushed in the still rudimentary mechanism of our social order. The existence of such individuals is a symptom" . . .

A symptom which should admonish us of the waste of possibilities of betterment, as well as the waste of suffering and life which is going on, unnoticed or taken for granted, everywhere around us. And in this sense also they are all admonishers, the inhabitants of those attic-slums of a Turin suburb; all those poor people, charming or harrowing, whose obscure struggles and joys and despair are chronicled in the autobiography of the printer Martino Stanga: the drunkard's wife who at last yields to the temptation of suicide; the girl who dies in childbirth, as her unknown mother did before her; the other girl who consoles the last months of the consumptive poet; that poet himself, unfit for any work save the one which gives him posthumous fame but has not given him food or fuel. These pathetic figures are all drawn that they may admonish us; even as their lives have admonished poor Stanga to turn from the selfish joys of his poor, arduous, intellectual culture to something—he hardly knows what—which shall make a difference in this ill-arranged world.

Martino Stanga, indeed, devotes himself to admonition as such; he writes a memorial, gradually transformed into the autobiography we are reading, which is to open the eyes of the young King and fire him with compassion for his suffering people; and the memorial is to come to the King's hands, and to the King's heart, by being that of a voluntary martyr: the poor printer will button his manuscript on to his breast and throw himself under the King's motor. Then the papers will have to discuss and to quote; and men will listen to the unknown dead man.

All this is what Signor Cena means by admonishing. But undoubted as he has made this meaning, I cannot but feel that he is mistaken in referring his title to any or all of his dramatis personae. Signor Cena has given his book a title suggestive of prophecy and warning because he has felt in himself the obscure and overwhelming sense of prophecy. The interest, the fascination, of the book lies in its being an exhortation to note the signs of the times, to prepare for the coming, certain though slow, of the spirit of righteousness whose dawn is filtering already through the world's darkness and rimming the mountain-tops with the light of the unrisen sun.

Chief among these signs is that sympathy and compassion are ceasing to be blind, and therefore ceasing to be cruel. Signor Cena's novel differs from any other Socialistic novel I know by its absence of hatred. The dramatis personae are in no sense rebels. If the *bourgeois* comes in for an occasional word of abuse, it is not stronger than the words of disgust for the degenerate or the criminal, who might be considered the *bourgeois's* victim. The etcher Quibio swears at the owners of a motor-car he meets on a Sunday, not because they are enjoying themselves in a costly manner, but because the dust and stench of their machine are spoiling his pleasure in the country. The poet, from all we are told, sings the sufferings of to-day, the hopes of to-morrow; he does not recriminate or inveigh. And Martino Stanga's monomania of martyrdom implies only his own death, not that of anyone else. The King, the newspapers, the governing classes, are not to be frightened by knifing or bomb-throwing; the poor fellow's hope is that their eyes will be opened, their hearts touched, by a life willingly sacrificed for the sake of truth and justice. To see, to understand, to feel, to endeavour: this is the virtuous circle in which the author believes as much as the hero;



but anger and injustice only perpetuate each other. The fact is that Martino Stanga no longer believes in the wickedness of any class or any civilisation, because he has recognised that the world and mankind are still young and in the making. The scientific reading out of which he has extracted for himself a philosophy and, in a sense, a theodicy has given him a kind of religious hope and religious resignation, an almost Franciscan feeling of the mysterious relationship of all things, not merely through causal connexion but through love and awe; he feels his own ephemeral and microscopic life enlarged by the sense of the life all-surrounding and everlasting. In this world, which is evolving slowly but inevitably towards fitness with the heart's desire of its conscious microcosm Man, the individual and his thoughts and will, his experience and his hope, become a cosmic force as majestic as those which mould the mountains and move the stars.

It is the consciousness of this, the possibility of conceiving such thoughts, which gives to this description of humble sufferings and wasted lives an extraordinary serenity. There is something more than symbolical, a real connexion of states of mind, in the way that Signor Cena always makes us feel the presence of the starry skies and purifying sunlight about those wretched slum-attics. Similarly, in his wonderfully subtle occasional words about poetry, music, and landscape, one understands that to him beauty is not merely a refreshment, a draught of vigour, on the way, but a discipline preparing our soul for higher and happier destinies. "Art," he says, "should beat time to life."

And life, in Signor Cena's conception, will become human just inasmuch as it obeys a deliberate rhythm and unites its various parts into a harmonious pattern—who knows?—into a great symphonic interchange of willing forces. His autobiographical hero has passed beyond the reach of any philosophical Anarchism, even as he has stood aside from any policy of civil war and terror. The spiritual disease and vileness which Dostoevsky and Gorky—even Rosny—would have shown us among the inhabitants of those miserable workmen's dwellings are barely noticed by Signor Cena, and never treated with complacency; all this is disease and productive of disease, and must be, will be, eliminated!

The printer's visit to the Maternity Hospital, his talk with the doctor, and the thoughts he carries away; all this revelation, in the presence of suffering and sin, of a passionately renewed ideal of chastity, of the purification of love for the sake of the future generations, these chapters have the religious solemnity of one of those frescoes of Besnard where a transfigured Christ stands among the beds and operating tables, with the white-smocked doctors instead of priests.

It is this intellectual and moral fervour which makes Signor Cena's novel so consoling and inspiring; out of the sordid present the doors and windows stand open on to the future.

It is, as I have said, symptomatic and prophetic; and its message is the transmuting power which a new conception of man's destinies must have, however slowly. The poet dies miserably in his garret; the poor printer perishes, we scarce know how, with his unread manuscript in his pocket; the charming, light-hearted artist disappears—we are not told whether into obscurity or into perhaps selfish glory. Signor Cena's dramas are all broken off miserably, his actors come to nothing; the "creatures of pure intelligence and sensibility" die childless, and only the drunkard, the seduced girl, the sick, overworked charwoman

multiply like some obscure and poison-bearing vermin. But outside his story he has placed two figures, the young doctor and doctress, of whom we learn nothing save their pity for the present, their efforts for the future. And we guess that these two strong, useful, and fortunate creatures are lovers; and that, symbolically speaking, their race, according to the spirit if not according to the flesh, is destined to increase and multiply and fill the earth. These are the real forerunners, the real prophets. And such a novel as Signor Cena's, where artistic beauty and dignity grow out of fervent purpose as the lovely shape of a chalice grows out of its consecrated usefulness, is itself a symptom, an admonition to our base practicality and our futile dilettantism.