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EDITORIAL

## JOHN SWINTON.

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**T**HE demise of John Swinton does more than to remove from the stage of the Labor Movement a highly interesting figure; it brings home the fact that an old era is closing, and an old book is being sealed with the death by old age of its most brilliant representatives.

The socialistic wave that went over this country in the forties was, of course, a utopian manifestation; nevertheless, it was not a manifestation of pure sentimentality. With the writings of Owen and especially of Fourier, from which to draw inspiration, the literature and speeches of the Socialists of those days could not escape a good deal of scientific solidity. This circumstance—paradoxical as it may sound—marked the Movement Ichabod in America. The material conditions were here wanting for a Movement of any degree of solidity. The ground had not yet been plowed by the plow of sentiment, a plow that ever precedes the sower and that opens the furrows for the seed to fall in. The Movement of the Forties was premature: it went under.

Its place was forthwith taken by another Movement, the very shortcomings of which gave full scope to its good qualities. This Movement was equipped with little positive information; it knew little of and cared less for scientific accuracy. It was all heart and all nerve: it was of sturdy make-up, marked with daring, integrity and fire. It was, in short, sentimental. It blazed its way by appeals to the heart, and it earned respect by the integrity of its apostles while riveting attention by the literary brilliancy of its spokesmen. John Swinton was the most conspicuous figure in that inestimable epoch.

It is natural with men as with Movements to imagine they are for all time and, accordingly, to be more or less at war with their inevitable successors. The thing is so natural that to score against the Sentimental Movement and its paladins the

dissent that marked their attitude towards their natural successor—constructive and revolutionary Socialism—were an ungrateful task, most of all at John Swinton's bier. That in which such dissent was manifested deserves mention, nevertheless. It deserves mention in that it aids in the understanding of important features in the everyday life of the present, the Socialist Movement, that do not lie upon the surface. One of these features is well illustrated by an incident in which John Swinton figured.

One afternoon, early in 1892, Swinton dropped into THE PEOPLE'S office. He came to inquire how the paper, then barely a year old, was getting along. He was told that the struggle was hard, but progress was visible. His looks denoted that he doubted not the "struggle," but questioned the "progress," and he presently said:

"Well, your paper cannot live. People don't understand your language. It is too technical. All these 'class struggle,' 'surplus values,' 'proletariat,' 'bourgeois,' and other terms are not understood without a dictionary. People don't read papers with dictionaries."

After some friendly chat Swinton took his leave. Not more than ten minutes later, in came into THE PEOPLE'S office a visitor from out of town; an old war-horse in the "Reform" movement. He, too, was curious about the paper's prospect, he inquired about men and things in New York, and, among others, he inquired after Swinton. When told that he was occupying the same chair that Swinton had vacated only a few minutes previous, he said:

"How sorry I am to have missed that grand old man! I never enjoyed anything so much as reading his paper. But, you know, ONE NEEDED A WEBSTER'S UNABRIDGED AT HAND TO UNDERSTAND HIM. HE USED SUCH HIGH LANGUAGE." (!!!!)

The language used by the Sentimental Movement merely enlarged the literary vocabulary of the readers: it imparted instruction in literature only; the language of the constructive and revolutionary Socialist Movement, by familiarizing with technical terms, imparts accurate conceptions and thereby a habit of accuracy in thought and diction, all of which are essential for constructive work.

All constructive Movements bring with them their own technical terms. That the Sentimental Movement needed none, and that such were even repulsive to it,

denoted the nature of its mission; that the Socialist Movement could not get along without such technical expressions, that it felt impelled to cause them to be understood, denotes its constructive character and points it heir and successor to the former.

And so it is. The Socialist Labor Party carries on to-day its constructive work aided therein by the sturdiness, the daring, the integrity and the fire handed down to it by the Movement of which John Swinton was a distinguished figure.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.  
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