

LETTER XIV

On Revolution as It Regards the Working Classes

The word revolution has a very terrible sound, particularly since that which happened in France nearly half a century ago, and frightened all the lords of the king's making in this mighty realm of ours. These same lords, at least many of them, and their immediate forefathers, thought very differently of the glorious revolution of 1688, which happened just a century before the great French revolution. Neither of these revolutions was of the least service to the real interests of the labouring classes, in either France or England; and were one of these government revolutions to take place at the present period, among ourselves or our neighbours, the producers would not, in the slightest degree, be benefited by it. Our position, as I have repeatedly said, is not political; and whether this party holds the helm of power, or that party with large promises of attention to the interests of the people, endeavours by our assistance to seize upon the management of the same helm, we must continue as we were before—the ill-paid servants, the hard-working slaves of the consuming and non-productive classes of the state. Revolutions are party concerns; and we, brethren, are in reality of no party. It is enough for us to be for ourselves—to be entirely of our own party; and it is actually for want of understanding our position, and acting in the spirit of unity for our own common cause, that we are now not only of no party, but that we are not the top and preponderate party in the state. It is because we do not stand as we ought to stand—as the commanding party, or rather the commanding influence in the nation, that any parties whatever have arisen, and that those whom we feed, and ought to command, are so perpetually at variance with one another. What is the origin of their disputes? Truly nothing more than the division of the spoil of which they have robbed us, and which, were we united, would never be their's to quarrel about. The Whigs who are in, and the Tories who are out, are struggling which shall have the direction of the wealth which we create; and at the same time, Lord Althorp,²⁰ kind and considerate soul! has a bill in parliament for building workhouses for the poor and helpless of those thus robbed, and for placing a distinct despotism over us, a government for our poor, quite independent of parliament! In every way, they draw a line between us and themselves. They would if possible enact a law, declaring that labourers are not human beings. They pray that we might be born with black skins like negroes; and if they dared, they would bring in a bill declaring that every child likely to become a labourer, should be dyed negro-colour on the day of its birth. They seem determined that we should have nothing in common with them. What have they in common with us, for the support and sustenance of which, brethren, they are not indebted to our labour? Let them think on that. It will be too late WHEN OUR TURN COMES!

The revolutions that have hitherto taken place, and have more or less stained the annals of history with mean vices and with bloodshed, have arisen among statesmen; sometimes to put in a king, in order to govern and plunder in his name, and sometimes to support one sort of priesthood against another, in order to patro-

²⁰ John Charles Spencer, Viscount Althorp and third Earl Spencer, 1782–1845, was the leader of the House of Commons and Chancellor of the Exchequer during Grey's Whig ministry of 1830–34. Althorp was involved in drafting the Poor Law Amendment Bill; something popularly recognized when the poor houses that were an integral part of the legislation came to be referred to as “Althorp's Bastilles.”

nise and share their ecclesiastical income: these were both the main causes of our glorious revolution of 1688. The French revolution had for its direct object the entire destruction of the priesthood and the aristocracy ; the evil of both was felt, it was become unbearable; but the middle rank of society, which rushed instantly to the helm, of affairs, was, like the middle class elsewhere, vain, ambitious, and vicious. They have the mischievous tyranny of the upper orders in them, unsoftened by instruction. The working classes knew no union—knew not their position or their rights—were instigated to the work of slaughter—and remained more wretched than they were before. The French revolution was, nevertheless, a great event, and many an important lesson, of immense benefit to mankind, has sprung out of it. It has weakened the aristocracy and the priesthood in every country; and although it did harm rather than good, as to its immediate consequences to the productive classes, by giving the middle class of capitalists more direct power over them, yet it has led to other and wider views of the real condition of mankind, and has shown that the highest position in society, does not belong to prescription, but to merit. Those who feed and clothe mankind are not to be the slaves of those who owe their honours to murder and rapine, or their wealth to treachery and deceit.

A movement of any extraordinary character cannot take place in public concerns, but what hundreds are ready to shout “revolution!” and some are ready to rejoice in some such event. We want no revolution, nor will we participate in any. There is a revolution silently going on, which is preparing us to take our turn, by and by, in the affairs of the world; and we are watching its progress, ready to seize upon every advantage it may offer us. Let it proceed quietly,—we are not impatient,—we know our turn is coming, and must come;—we will use it wisely. Can the Whigs prevent the coming of that turn? Impossible! Those who call themselves the liberal statesman of the present day, must go progressively with the people; but in the word PEOPLE (a word very much misunderstood) they must, brethren, include us, the productive labourers, for what are the people without us? And yet, brethren, while we work not for ourselves, but for the capitalists and the profit-mongers, we can hardly rank with the PEOPLE. The people have a political position, but we have none that we can make any use of with benefit to ourselves. As associated labourers, working in the bond of unity for the reciprocal advantages of each other, we should be the PEOPLE—the head of the people; but what are we as hireling servants—as slaves of the greedy, purse-proud lordlings who look at us as the Norman lords of yore looked at their serfs?

Do we wait until some great political occurrence should aid us to remove the great evil that attaches itself to our social condition? Do not deceive yourselves, brethren; none but yourselves can be your liberators. Althorp, the most liberal of the Whigs—the minister who is particularly called the “good-hearted man” can do nothing for you, but build workhouses to receive you in the wretchedness of your old age. They can do nothing for you. If you yourselves had the appointment of an administration, you could not name men capable of doing any thing for your relief. You must help yourselves; and it is sometimes the best position that a man or body of men can find themselves in, to be thus thrown so entirely upon their own exertions. Every thought is summoned up, every energy is upon the stretch ; when a man is obliged to be his own friend, nothing is left undone; he is a true friend to himself—and such, brethren, we must be to ourselves.

State revolutions are, in fact, of no concern whatever to us, brethren, as long as we are shackled with social dependence, as long as we are obliged to sell ourselves by the week, instead of sharing in the products of our toil. You remember the old fable of the beast of burden and his driver. “Make haste, you lazy, heavy-heeled

brute,” exclaimed the stupid clown, beating his poor ass over the head at the same time; “make haste, or we shall fall into the hands of our enemies of the opposite party.” ‘Twas at the time of one of those revolutionary freaks called civil wars, which are always so full of high public spirit and bloodshed. “What are your parties to me?” said the wretched ass, shaking his ears that felt as well as heard the impatience of his alarmed driver. “What shall either I or you, you servile lout, be the worse or the better, whether we belong to this party of state plunderers or the other? We cannot labour more than twenty hours in the twenty-four for either party; and I must have provender, and you must have bread of some sort; and that of the opposite party, as you call them, can’t well be coarser or less in quantity than what we get now. Don’t be such a fool, beating me for nothing, and putting yourself in a sweat, merely because one set of state robbers are at logger-heads with another. If you had half the sense in that thick skull of thine as I have in my heels, you’d take advantage of their dissensions; fill the panniers on your own account, and lead me quietly off to a snug retreat, where you might contentedly enjoy what you could get independently of parties that don’t concern you, and leave me to enjoy a bunch of clover, with the relish of a thistle or two, at my leisure!” ‘O, the villainous ass he talks treason! and has no respect for property!’ exclaimed Balaam Blunderhead, and would have belaboured the poor beast again, but the knowing neddy lifted up his hind heels with a spring, and floored the capitalist; then, braying aloud, he started off with the empty panniers to a distant meadow; while the miserable and stupid slave of property was taken prisoner, and made to work, just as he had worked before, for the adverse party of consumers. All revolutions, brethren, are revolutions of this sort; and the small capitalist, and the workman, are always in the condition of the ass and his driver. These little capitalists are, under the circumstances of the present period, more stupid than the stupidest of asses. They scrape together, by rigid saving, or their fathers and friends before them contrived, by severe toil and penurious frugality, to get together a few hundreds, or perhaps a thousand or two pounds. What do they do with it? With a servility to the consuming wretches of the basest description, they set up business, as they term it, against each other. They undersell each other; they catch the customers from each other by dint of low, profitless prices; they are obliged to force down wages to the lowest starving pitch; and these very men, who have it in their power to be of use to themselves and to the community of workmen, from among whom they are hardly emerged, are, by their conduct, ruining one another, and, more than any other set of individuals in the realm, are depreciating the rate of wages and doubling the wretchedness of the productive labourers. But I shall very shortly consider the position of the small capitalist more closely, and endeavour to prove to them that their real interest is UNION.

With revolution, brethren, I repeat, we have no concern; and yet it is to us that all the factious state revolutionists turn their attention: and when they want to make what the French call “un coup d’essai” a grand stroke of policy, they always begin to work upon our prejudices and those of the petty capitalists, who, as tradesmen and small manufacturers, constitute the skirts of the middle class of society. The Tory church party, with Peel, Wellington, Wetherell, Sugden, and others of that stamp, particularly silly Winchilsea, vain Wharncliffe, and slobbering Wynford, want to get up the revolutionary cry of the “Church in danger”—they do not exactly intend to bring about a revolution; but I believe they care little what happens, so long as they can keep the church properly under aristocratic patronage. They do love that lump of rubbish dearly. You have seen a dunghill cock and his brood of hens and their chicks upon a heap of muck in a stable-yard. You have observed how they scratch and scratch and scratch, and pick and pick. They are in a state of voluptuous ecstasy. There

is not much clacking or crowing among them; they have no time for any thing but scratching and picking, except that now and then the overgrown Dorking dunghill, in the pride of his heart, beats his wings against his sides, stretches out his neck, and crows aloud with delight, while all the little cock adooos, and the hens and the broodies, chuckle, and twaddle, and cackle in chorus; and should a stray terrier cur, with a Whig-gish-looking snout, like the nose of the Lord Chancellor, happen to run in among them, the clamour becomes absolutely revolutionary, as they all at once rush upon him to drive him off their sacred territory. This is a correct picture of the gallant Chancellor of the University of Oxford, with the Tory statesmen, and the Tory peers, and the Tory parsons, and the Tory gownsmen of all sorts, just now at Oxford and at Apsley House. They would get up just so much of a revolution as might startle Earl Grey. Let them take care what they are about. Revolution of some sort cannot be very distant; it is, in fact, now quietly progressing; a small matter might rouse it into tumult; but remember, brethren, our social rights must be first gained before we are roused by a church and king cry, or any other loyal or disloyal cry: till then with revolutions we have no concern!

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