

LETTER IV

The theme on which I am addressing you, my beloved and associated brethren, is itself too important to give place to observations that arise in my mind on the occurrences of the day; but, as some of those occurrences belong to my theme itself, they demand immediate notice. The hostile spirit which the State power has displayed with respect to the unfortunate men of Dorsetshire,⁷ is, I must confess, beyond the worst of the bad deeds which I believed them capable of committing. I understand them now. I had a hope that still clung to them. I endeavoured to persuade myself that they could not fail to see the vantage point in which they might step forward as arbitrators between labour and capital; but it is plain that they have made up their minds to stand by the old system, just as their noble premier once declared that he had made up his mind to stand by his order. The old system of competition, and the old order of aristocracy, are both rotten. They may have had their uses; but they are, neither of them, suited to the present period. The more quietly they make their exit, the better it will be for their still lingering friends, and for the public generally.

The hostility to our cause, as it is shown in the case of the Dorsetshire men is mean and pitiful; but it is not the less rancorous and virulent. I am scarcely correct in calling it pitiful, but I do not use the term with any reference to the circumstances of the victims. Let the clubs of the West-end⁸ – the exclusives and the black-ball clubs – the fashionable free-masons – the Cumberlanders – the orange and conservative bands – let these come forward with their oaths of every party colour – let them show me six men among them all of greater piety, or higher moral rectitude; men more entitled to bind their bond of temporal union with an appeal to eternity. Oaths, public and private, have been in use among mankind ever since the human mind was impressed with an idea of a deity. As pledges of veracity and fidelity, they have been demanded in the most scandalous profusion by the government and by the church of England. At the treasury, the custom-house, at the courts of law, and at the two universities, the Deity is perpetually insulted by the false and contradictory appeals that are made to him. Oaths are, in all these places, taken for the most selfish considerations. Upon a far better principle did these six poor men endeavour to bind themselves to be true to their common interests. If anything could restore sanctity to oaths in the eyes of the public, after the open and infamous abuse of them by the church and the state, it would be the solemn adjuration of a Creator, and by their hopes in a future state, to stand by one another for their right to such remuneration of their labour as may suffice for the food, clothing, and the shelter of themselves and their families! It is nothing to the point, brethren, that many of you may be ready to say with me, “we want no oaths – sound-hearted, sensible men, impressed with a proper sense of the important objects which they have in view, want no oaths to bind them to one another!” This is not the question. I want to know where is the equity, where the common honesty, of transporting men for taking among themselves an oath of this nature, and for so laudable a purpose, while thousands are everyday compelled to take oaths of the most absurd character, and which they can seldom take without injuring their morals, and in-

7 A reference to the six Dorsetshire labourers (the so-called Tolpuddle Martyrs) who were tried, convicted and transported to Australia in 1834 for administering oaths in connection with the an agricultural union of which they were members.

8 Of London.

sulting their God! Am I told that such an honest, such a truly religious and virtuous oath is illegal – that there exists a law upon the statute-book against taking such an oath? Then let the period in which such a law was made be as a warning to us in the annals of our country; and let us lament that there ever could be men among us actuated by such miserably selfish motives as not to understand the beauty and the rectitude of all union, and particularly of the union of the poor, to preserve the worth of their labour!

I ask not whether the execrable law is of Whig or Tory origin. The Whigs have adopted, and have even perverted it from its original intent, in order to make it their instrument of vengeance! But do they really know what they are about? Will they not see, in the spirit with which you, my brethren, have advocated the cause of these victims of injustice, what our opinion is of the transaction? Will they openly tell you that they despise you and your opinions; and that they will not desist from their hostility until they have broken up your Union, and bound you in hireling slavery to the mill wheels of the capitalists? Will their conduct bear any other interpretation? I lament to say that it will not. I grieve from my very soul, brethren: I grieve to perceive that the State power is so blind and so infatuated – so much the tool of the mistaken interests of a mere handful of capitalists, as thus to place themselves at issue with associated labour, and to commence the warfare – (what else but warfare is it?) – with such a deed of cruelty and injustice! Do they expect to check in the smallest degree the progress of the cause of associated labour by any such proceeding? If they have any such idea, it is because they know little of the circumstances of the times – they understand nothing of the crisis which the gigantic powers of knowledge and industry have produced!

The productive classes in this country are capable of creating, in any given portion of time, a quantity of useful and exchangeable wealth, of which, fifty years ago, no person could have formed the most distant conception. The spring – the prime movement – the quickening impulse of the mighty creative power, was found among the abject, the despised, the labouring poor. The vital flame did not emanate from among the learned or the rich. Arkwright, and Crompton, and Peel, and Watts, and the other inventors and improvers and first employers of the machinery, started from among the people – from among the humblest of the people. The capitalists of their day trembled at the power which they saw coming into competition with them; and, with great reluctance, connected themselves with it; but the immense profits, the more than princely fortunes, with which it recompensed its inventors, and those who aided them with money, encouraged the belief that there is no assignable boundary to the realization of the most extravagant expectations of the most avaricious. The plenty produceable by the ingenuity and industry of man, acting by means of machinery continually improving in creative power, has indeed no assignable limit; but the profit derivable to individual capitalists, in the creation of such plenty, has its limit – a limit at which the capital of the kingdom has long since arrived, and where it is struggling by every sort of temporary manoeuvre to save itself from being crushed and crumbled to atoms.

Plenty is a terrible foe to profit. Every capitalist hates the plenty of another. “Plenty is an evil!” said the late Lord Liverpool, about fifteen years ago. The Dutch annually destroy more than half the produce of their spice islands; and corn-importers have been accused of throwing half their cargoes into the sea. What cries have we heard respecting over production and glutted markets! And what stagnation of trade, what misery, what nakedness, and what hunger have been caused by warehouses chokeful, from the ground floors to the roofs, with corn and clothing! There is an awful lesson in this incontrovertible statement! turn or twist of that

accommodating divinity for which the men of profit build chapels and churches? Can it, I ask, be reconciled to Christianity, by any pretence worthy the name of common sense, that the pious manufacturer, after having heard the gospel on Sunday, shall tell the wretched hundreds that surround his works and his warehouses on the Monday morning, that they have made so much plenty that they must starve? That they have called into existence, by the energy of their minds and the strength of their hands, so much clothing, that nakedness must be their lot? That they have, in fact, created so much wealth, that they must pine in poverty?

No, brethren, the connexion between plenty and misery, which is perpetually recurring, is as contrary to Christianity as it is to nature and to reason; and it proves, in the most plain and direct manner possible, that the system of individual profits and hiring labour is totally at variance with the welfare and improvement of mankind. It proves that our only hope upon earth is in associated labour; and it proves still more – it proves that manufacture, with its increased powers of production, and its daily extending powers of communication, will go in a course of temporary employment, diminished profits, depressed wages, misery, ruin and discontent, until the generous and Christian system of Associated Labour shall be generally adopted, or turbulent revolution overwhelm the civilized world. The struggles between selfish profits and impoverished labour have ruined the finest and most flourishing states on the face of the globe. Wherever plenty has been, there the selfish usurper and monopolizer of that plenty has seen his profits decline, and, in expectation of retaining or improving them, he has crushed and oppressed the producers, until the miserable beings, maddened by constant irritation, have either risen in vengeance or have sunk into abject wretchedness, servility, and vice. The plenty of nature, when seized upon by individuals, and distributed at, what the slang of our political economists calls, a remunerating price, is as replete with misery as the plenty of manufacture; and when we seek for the causes that have made Italy and Sicily the lovely residence of squalid poverty, we shall find them in the precarious profits which are endeavoured to be extracted from the constant munificence of God and nature. But, in the course of these letters, it is my intention to show, from historical and geographical facts, that it is the necessary consequence of improving cultivation and manufacture to render rents and profits impossible – aye, completely unattainable; and that this is a state in which we are, in this country, plunged at present; where we see thousands daily thrust into workhouses, or compelled to emigrate, merely because the usurpers of the plenty we produce keep insisting upon an unattainable profit ere they will permit the distribution of it. The landowners know that, were the Corn Laws⁹ to be repealed, their rents would flit away like the shadows of summer clouds; but the Corn Laws must be repealed, for the rising spirit of Associated Labour will not permit their continuance. At the repeal of these scandalous enactments, the capitalists will at first rejoice; but production, the offspring of intellectual and bodily labour, will again force their temporary profit to its farthest limit, and compel them to acknowledge that in Associated Labour and general union the peace, the strength, the happiness of themselves and their fellow-creature is to be found. Seek you for practical Christianity, brethren? For more than eighteen hundred years Christianity has been preached, but it has no where been practical, and it never can become practical, until the system of Associated Labour shall be established.

SENEX.

⁹ The Corn Laws, passed in 1815, prevented the importation of foreign wheat until the domestic price rose to 80 shillings a quarter.