

LETTER VIII

The Representation of the Productive Class in Parliament

While thousands of honest and hard-working labourers of every description are in the lowest state of want, our liberal ministers have been contriving a statute to diminish the relief those unfortunate men may be compelled to claim from the poor's rate;¹⁵ and at the same time these ministers defend the scandalous pensions on the civil list, paid to the paupers of high life, as vested rights. It would be lamentable, brethren, to see the names of men, among those of the defenders of those vested rights, who were chosen to the reformed parliament as friends of the people, did we not well know that such men are totally unworthy of our confidence. He, of DERBY, with his drivelling amendment, was an advocate for the vested rights of the state paupers! Look, at the present condition of the labouring class in that town, and then ask yourselves, brethren, if the interests of productive labour do not demand representatives of very different feelings, and of a very different kind of understanding. There is no need of saying more upon this subject at present. These things are warnings to us. Is property, with all its tyrannies, and with all sympathies towards vested rights, to represent us, to represent labour and the interests of the great productive union, much longer in the legislature? What! after the scene in the House of Commons, on Mr. Harvey's motion, is there one of our whole body that can suppose that those men care half as much about any of us, the labouring class, as they do about the lords and ladies, the baronets and the baronetesses, whom the pay of the pension-list, out of our labour, enables to meet them in general society, and to make their bows and their curtsies in what is called high life? Besides, the wealthy manufacturers, enriched by their enormous profits out of your labour, have some prospects of becoming baronets themselves; and while they blame you for marrying, and endeavouring to bring up a happy family by your unremitted toil, are contriving how they may unite themselves to the aristocracy, and leave their wealth and titles to their eldest son, and stick their younger children upon the pension-list! We know them now; and let every increase of knowledge, brethren, have its due effect upon our future actions.

Our enemies boast among themselves of our want of a well-regulated plan of action, and of a general want of decision. I was in a company of capitalists and their dependants a few days ago, in which the folly of the operative class was matter of frequent observation from a man of influence, a rich man, and a lawyer, who uttered some things that are worth recollecting. He said that you could only make alternate struggles and submissions, until you were reduced into a state worse than slavery, unless you could form large partnership manufactories and trades among yourselves, upon a pure republican principle; but not only would the laws respecting partnerships effectually prevent you from doing so, but also your mistrust of one another, your jealousies, enmities, and God knows what, would keep you from even attempting any thing of the kind. How little, brethren, does such a man know you! How wholly does he estimate you by the characters of the litigating herd which surround him and enrich him out of the plunder of one another! No, we have no mistrust of one another, and we care not a farthing for the law respecting partnerships. We cannot wrong one another, for there is no man in UNION who can imagine a selfish interest. Every unionist feels that he is, as an individual, nothing—worse than nothing—a mere understrapper and tool of some proud profit-monger, who in his Sunday gig, would run

¹⁵ This was the much excoriated Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834.

over him and his children if they happened to cross his way in his drive to his villa ; but he knows, he intimately understands, he feels intensely, that, connected with the UNION, he is part of a mighty body, the producers, and, in some sense (I speak it with reverence) the creators of all that is valuable upon earth. Conscious of this, is it possible that any of the productive class can hesitate to join in the only means that can render their whole body effective? Severally and separately we must, indeed, struggle and starve, and drop into worse than slavery; but we will act in UNION, in one Grand Consolidated UNION,—and we, my beloved, brethren, will enslave none—we will injure none; even our oppressors, who never yet knew what happiness is, shall be happy in the brotherhood which, in Christian charity, we will hold out to them. The way is open before us, and a short time will serve to show that we are able, whatever may be the silly and wicked laws upon the statute-book to restrain the partnerships of honest and beneficent labour, to act together, without jealousies or enmities, in the bond of UNION, good feeling, and general prosperity.

In the meantime, it behoves us, brethren, to look attentively to the state of our representation in the legislature. We perceive that our direct influence in the House of Commons is very small. Our sentiments are never uttered in that assembly in the tone which, ought always to belong to them. We may possibly have as many as half a dozen friends in that place; but there is scarcely one of that half dozen for whose sincerity in our cause I would venture to hold myself responsible. Property regards Labour as a beast of burden; and though there may be some of the property-people more inclined to soothe it, to stroke it and even to feed it, than others, yet they all dread the idea of letting it loose. There is not a man among them, brethren, who does not think, and say, that this beast of burden is actually a wild beast, and that it would, if set at liberty, lay waste and devour all the property in the land! Yes, brethren, upon this very pretence it is that they deny us our share in the legislative representation of the country! They deny this most sacred right, upon the plea, that property is more sacred, that property must be kept aloof from us, that property, and property alone, may be preserved, even at the danger and the certainty of sacrificing, annually, thousands of that great productive class, from whose toil, property, their boasted property, had its birth! What, brethren, what is it that these proud and selfish fools are afraid of? Is it likely that we will destroy that which is our own offspring? No, brethren, we have no madness of that nature in us: we are more likely to increase and to improve it, and to turn it to good account, than to destroy it. We certainly shall instruct the representatives of the great productive, when we have the pleasure of sending such representatives to the national parliament, to look after our darling offspring, property, and to be very watchful that it does not go astray, as it has been sadly doing, for the want of our paternal care and attention. We shall undoubtedly prevent its getting into court corruptions and court intrigues, and we shall warn it against giving ear to the vested rights of state paupers. We shall inquire into its transactions at the Treasury, and balk the foolish fondness it has acquired for playing at soldiers. We shall show it how it must act for the general benefit, and particularly how it must obey the fifth commandment, by honouring its parents, its fathers and mothers, who compose the great productive class of the country; for, unless property does so honour those who gave it existence, it may depend upon it, its days will not be long in the land. And we would advise property to remember, that building workhouses for starving and toiling parents, is not honouring them, and will have no effect in preventing that ruin, which its present pride, injustice, voluptuousness, corruption, hardness of heart, and inveterate selfishness, is bringing upon the land that gave it birth!

Yes, brethren, productive labour must, indispensably, take its seat in the senate. We were formerly told

that we wanted knowledge, and it used to be most learnedly asserted, that some heads were made to think, and some not to think at all. Aye, ye men whose labour has enriched the nation, it was seriously asserted at colleges and in pulpits, that your heads were not intended by the great Creator of the universe for the powers of thought. No, “in the divine order of providence it is determined,” I quote from the book of a bishop, “some shall think and rule, while others shall work and obey.” And we, and our fathers before us, saw the former class of men go on from year to year, thinking, ruling, and robbing, while we of the latter class continued working, and obeying, and starving! Faith, brethren, it is time to let these thinkers know that we can think and rule quite as well as they can, without robbing even them, who have been so long robbing us. This can be only done by demanding admission for the representatives of labour in the legislature.

In case of a dissolution of parliament, we might, by means of our extensive and Consolidated UNION, do something towards rendering the next parliament much more favourable to our cause than the present, which was got up upon mere party principles. The Reform Bill has hitherto been useless, but we have not had time and opportunity to render it subservient to our great purpose of securing to productive labour its due share of the plenty which it produces; yet we were not without great weight and influence in the constituency during the last election; and, indeed, it was chiefly through our misdirected efforts that the Whigs obtained so vast a preponderance. We ought not, as I observed in a former letter, to reproach ourselves for the support we then gave to the framers of a bill, which at least, pretended to have a sort of leaning towards our interests; but we have paid the Whigs for this beneficial seeming of their famous bill; and it is now our business to try, by every means, to render the bill itself of such use to us, as we by our energy may turn it to, on occasion of a new election. The Whig administration is breaking to pieces as fast as it can. In these times, no ministry can hold together upon the old plunder and vested-right system! There must be frequent changes and frequent elections too! Be watchful, brethren; take means, by steadfast adherence to one another, to move firmly on, and at every change, your power will be more and more felt and acknowledged. There are some among you who are, for your sakes, keeping a close watch upon the conduct of those who, through your preponderating influence, obtained their present seats in the reformed parliament. The names of those members are in a note-book, and their deeds, not absolutely to say their faults, are conned by rote!

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