

LETTER XIII

On The Folly of Looking To Government for Social Aid

It seems natural that the people should look to those who have been appointed to direct the affairs of the state for some alleviation of their grievances—that the poor should fly to the government for protection from the hard-hearted avarice of the rich; and that the oppressed should, under the wings of government, seek shelter from the proud man and the oppressor. We are instructed in our youth from the pulpit, that our rulers are appointed by God, and that, next to the Divine Being, we owe obedience to the king and his counsellors. “Love God and honour the king,” is set at the head of our primers; and we are taught to lisp loyalty almost as soon as we can call our wretched and laborious mothers by the first endearing epithet of infant want and affection. Before our reason is mature, we are overwhelmed and astounded by the exalted appellations and attributes which are bestowed upon monarchs, and courts, and lords, and parliaments. We are seized upon in the state of helpless ignorance, and then, not only bowed down to obedience, but, impelled by all the natural respect which, in our state of humble dependence, we cannot refrain from bearing to the friends and instructors around us, to believe that love and adherence to the government under which we are born is our most important duty; and that, in return for such adherence, we shall meet with protection and a regard for the interests of the class to which we belong. Good heavens! how dreadfully are we abused! how scandalously is our understanding perverted, under the plea: of morals and religion! How vilely and hypocritically do those who pretend to expound the equalizing doctrines of Christianity to us betray “the Son of Man” and make even him the pander to the arts of our oppressors!

Blinded by a system which has for its object the depriving of the laborious classes of the eyes of reason, thousands among us, brethren, enter their manhood with an absolute fear and hatred of the powers of thinking. We feel that we are in the midst of miseries, the sources of which, we cannot understand; and, from the early prepossessions that have been so forcibly impressed upon our minds, we have some sort of indistinct idea that it is the business of the government to remove, or at least to mitigate, the causes of our sufferings. We have no notion of asking ourselves what government actually is. And, indeed, were we to ask ourselves this perplexing question, how few are there among us who have time or knowledge to investigate it, or to form any sort of rational reply to it! Many of us labour twelve or fourteen hours in the day, and then fly to the short and stupefying relaxation of the porter-pot, the gin-glass, and the pipe. We have no time to attempt to think, or to restore those natural powers of thought which have been distorted and crippled by the prejudices of the society with which we are surrounded. Instead, therefore, of enquiring what government is, or what it is able or may be willing to do for us, we confide ourselves to its care, and sometimes are foolish enough to be surprised that we obtain no relief whatsoever from it. Even those writers who are friendly to our interests, and have closely considered our situation—who have even participated in our wants, and have sometimes sprung from our own unhappy ranks—have generally imbibed and promulgated the idea, that government would and could do much for the labouring class, if that class were admitted into the representative portion of it. Ah, well-a-day, these writers, much as I respect their principles and views, have looked at government only on one side: they see only what it might DO, they do not perceive how much it must UNDO, before any thing can be

done effectually to benefit the class, brethren, to which we belong, and in which it is our doom continually either to struggle or to starve; and frequently both to struggle and to starve at the same time.

Look at the present Whig ministry, brethren Look at the principles they formerly advocated, and to which they owed that short-lived popularity which they have themselves blasted, because they could not act upon the truths they so forcibly upheld. Do you think that these Whigs, weak, confused, and nugatory as their measures have been, would not at least do something in accordance with the truths with which, theoretically, they showed themselves to be so conversant, if they could? Their consistency as statesmen, their integrity as men, depends upon this; then, why do they not at least attempt to do something? The answer is plain. They know that before they can DO a little, they must UNDO a great deal. This work of UNDOING IS the very-devil to the Whigs; it makes Earl Grey tremble in front of the noble lords, whom he regrets to see arrayed in opposition to him, and it converts Brougham himself into a blustering buffoon, showing his dexterity at shuffling and sliding off the woolsack! Without it, without the arduous labour of undoing, all legislation is so much lost time, and reform is mere patchwork. The Tories are daring the presumptuous Whigs to the task; and the Whigs are manifestly undone themselves, whether they attempt that task or not. They are not the men for any such undertaking this their political opponents know well ENOUGH and this we, brethren who have no political position in society, know also. Let these two great parties, who have so long alternately been plundering the people, laugh at each other. There are obstacles in the ruinous nuisances which encumber the political ground for which they are ever disputing; and which each party desires to call his own, that must be removed; but which neither of them dares to touch. Session after session may pass away; reform may succeed reform; the church, Irish or English, may cry out “murder” and frighten the Bishops; legal reform may startle all the attorneys in the land, and the poor laws’ consolidated act may threaten to convert all our manufactories into work-houses. All this, brethren, may take place, but while the things that ought to be done remain still to be undone, nothing can possibly be done that ought to be done. But I have a notion brethren, that the ungracious task of undoing, like all unpleasant labours, which lords and ladies are afraid would soil their delicate hands, and which the clergy think unbecoming their sacred calling, will be turned to us at last. We really wish most sincerely to have nothing to do with the dangerous and dirty job. We are fully inclined to leave them to remove their rubbish entirely their own way, by their own people, with their own machines, and in a manner most conformable to their own views of what ought to be done with it. But there they stand, unable to do any thing either for themselves or for us, because it completely obstructs them in all movements; and yet, as if they were apprehensive that some tremendous monster was beneath it, who would be liberated by its removal and devour them all, they stand trembling, and dare scarcely stretch out their hands towards it, or even look at it for ten minutes together. The king walks past it, surrounded by a dozen heads of the church, and her gracious majesty tells her chamberlain that she cannot bear to think of it. The lords in waiting consider it very ancient and ornamental, while the maids of honour have invented a number of pet names for it. The Whigs in public do speak of the propriety of removing it gradually in as cautious a manner as possible; but being informed by the Tories and the leading bishops, at an accidental collision in the drawing-room, that the odour of this rubbish, which some had vulgarly called “a stench” was considered very salubrious by the king, the duke of Cumberland, the young princess, and the court physicians; they are about to bring in a bill for the extraction of its essence for the benefit of the Brunswick family. There is no doubt but that this bill, like all other Whig

bills, would lose its essence in committee. For our part, brethren, we may be assured that, until this rubbish is removed, there is no use in our expecting any measure from either government or parliament in the slightest degree beneficial to our interests.

But, setting aside all metaphor, it is plain to any man who thinks upon the subject, and reads the debates in the newspaper reports for one week together, that government, as it is at present circumstanced, is reduced to a mere stand still. The Whigs can never have the same monstrous power of doing wrong that the Tories so long enjoyed, not at the expense of this nation alone, but at the expense of mankind generally. It is impossible that the Whigs can outrage all human rights in so barefaced and so unblushing a manner. Even the Tories had arrived at the end of their profligate career: even they, with the hypocrisy of an Eldon, the plausibility of a Wharncliffe,¹⁸ and determination of a Wellington at their head, could do no more evil; and felt, upon their attempt to do good, that it was abhorrent to their nature, and detrimental to their existence. They repealed the civil disabilities of Dissenters and Catholics; and they saw that were they to proceed any farther in a liberal road, so unknown and so dangerous to conservatives, they would be soon be buried under the rubbish of oppression and corruption, which they had ventured to disturb. They were every way blocked up and jammed in by the ruins of all the best interests of the land; and, less apparently, but not less effectually, by the condition in which our interests, brethren, the interests of the great productive class, were placed. “Something must be done,” was shouted from public meeting to public meeting, while tithe-proctors, tax-gatherers, and overseers of the poor, responded, in a variety of tones, “Something must be done.” But the gallant duke, then at the head of the Tory ministry, though he is always as brazen, was then as motionless, as the statue of Achilles in Hyde-park. It was then that the overgrown capitalists and profit-mongers began to leave off praying the military political duke. They began to think that King Stork was become a mere King Log. They wanted something to be done,—and they, too, had an idea, a very vague and indistinct idea, that nothing could be done until something was undone,—so even they, with much reluctance, joined the moderate reformers, and, hoping that no harm would come of it, shouted, “Reform!”

The Whigs came in; they brought forward their first and their second Reform Bills; and the Whigs are as completely fixed—as entirely incapable of doing any thing of importance for the good, or indeed for the further injury of the country, as the Tories were observed to be before the reform was proposed by their opponents to the king in cabinet council, or brought by them, as ministers of the crown, before parliament. The reason is that the rubbish they removed, the rotten boroughs¹⁹ they set aside, had done all the mischief they could do, had done to the country all the wrongs it could sustain, long before. The rotten boroughs could have done the country no more harm; for another injury would ruin it outright, or instigate it to revolutionary madness. It is no benefit to tell a man who is bleeding from wounds in all his limbs, that you have wrested the weapon out of the hands of his assassin, and thrown it into the sea. No, we must seek for remedies; we must stop the flow of blood; we must close the wounds; we must bandage the members; we must calm the fever; we must strengthen the vital powers, and renovate those energies which are both the causes and the consequences of life. This would indeed be undoing the evil that has been committed; but these, brethren, neither Whigs nor

18 Possibly John Stuart-Wortley, second Baron Wharncliffe, 1801-55, a Tory politician of the period.

19 Boroughs with few electors under the control of local magnates who in effect determined who they would return to Parliament.

Tories are capable of effecting. It is a task of labour and of love; a task of strong feeling, and of pure patriotism; a task that can only be effected by men in UNION; a task which will ere long be thrown into our hands, and which we must prepare ourselves to undertake, if we would save our country from the results of that selfish ambition and avarice which always arise in political parties during the anarchy of a tumultuous revolution. We desire not at present to be political: our turn is coming, but it is not yet arrived. We will, in the meantime, by every means in our power, acquire that weight and preponderance in society which productive labour has a right to demand, and which the Association of Productive Labour is certain to secure. By so doing, we cannot be dragged into the vortex of that REVOLUTION, which is even now in progress, and which we must govern as Unionists, or under which we must be ignorantly and viciously sunk as slaves.

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