

LABOUR LETTER X

On The Pretended Ignorance of the Labouring Classes

THERE is a most discouraging opinion, brethren, frequently in the mouths of our oppressors and their tools, which is sometimes received and countenanced by some among ourselves, and this I must examine, and call upon you to examine with me, before we proceed further respecting the leading object of our Union. I have heard it repeatedly asserted, and very lately by a person who advocates the justice of your cause, that the majority of you are too ignorant to conduct your own affairs. This is a very old accusation, and has served as a wonderfully convincing reason to prove that one part of mankind should be the drudges of the other, ever since society had any sort of existence. And from whom, brethren, does this accusation, at this period, proceed and by whom is it countenanced? Replies to these queries crowd upon me; but we must pause, and put them a little into order. The subject is an important one; but I think the more it is considered the more simple it will appear; and I despair not of being able, in a very few paragraphs, to put down the accusation and the accusers, and to give more mental strength and self-confidence to such of ourselves, who, it seems, have been somewhat cowed and disheartened by it,

First, as to our ignorance and incapacity. Those who wish us to be blind, who have done, and still do all they can to put out our mental eyesight, are, it must be allowed, extremely kind. In the old-fashioned mills, where horses were used, they were frequently bandaged or blinded, to prevent the poor animals becoming giddy, and because in that state, as I have been told, they would work harder. Our task-masters, upon the same principle, blind us as much as they can; and when they find that they cannot altogether put out our eyes, they endeavour to persuade us either that we cannot see, or that we are giddy and deluded. Kind and considerate souls! How much we are obliged to them! They lay a heavy tax upon the windows of intellect; they do all they can to cover every pane of mental glass with obscure and distorted figures, like the chalk and water dauberries in the kitchen windows at the west end of London, and then they tell us we are too blind to manage our own concerns, while we must be thankful to them for managing our affairs for us. Under this pretence, they rob us, and almost work us to death; and yet these are persons who really mean well to us, crying out, ah, this is but too true! The majority of the people are not sufficiently instructed to be entrusted with power: we must illuminate their minds before we can venture to advocate their elevation in the scale of society!

Brethren, there is an immensity of benefit in what is called education; but do not suffer yourselves to be tricked and bamboozled out of your rights under the notion that you must have education before you are fit to have justice. Education is a very good thing; but men and children must live as well as learn; besides, there is such a thing as education without knowledge, and there is also such a thing as knowledge without education; and of these two things the last is much better than the first. Perhaps, after all that can be done in the business of education, the common sense of mankind will remain pretty nearly at the same level. There are many learned men who are very great fools, and there are men who do not know “a B from a bull’s-foot,” and yet are very sensible and intelligent members of society. All useful knowledge consists in the acquirement of ideas concerning our condition in life; and there are few men of common observation who do not get into their minds, whether they can read and write or not, the ideas that are most serviceable to them. The position

of a man in society, with its obligations and interests, forces ideas upon him which all the theory of education would not have impressed upon him as long as he was not called upon practically to make use of them.

It is thus that those who have no political rights never think of the manner in which such rights may be rendered beneficial to themselves, their families, and their neighbours. But, bestow on them those rights, and there is no doubt but they will soon learn how to turn them to account. Where a man must do nothing but labour hard and long, with very short intervals of rest and relaxation, it is useless to pretend to implant upon his mind ideas that belong to a different condition of life; and it is the very height of cruelty to say that his condition shall not be improved until his ideas are more numerous and more enlarged. Alter his position; connect him, not merely in practical labour, but in practical rights and duties, with his fellow men, and you will be apt to wonder at the ease with which he will adapt himself to his new situation. Upon an average, brethren, in our class of society, measured or weighed with equal numbers in the other classes, we are as good husbands, as good fathers, as good neighbours, as other men. We have our follies and our vices, and so have they. They have more opportunities of concealment than we have: they have cloaks for their shame, which we cannot afford. They have more of the decencies of life, but we have quite as much of the virtues. Our indulgences are short, and they are, therefore, apt to be violent; and, as we too often want the art and means to disguise the consequences of them, they shock the delicacy and hypocrisy of those who call themselves our betters. There are some among these betters of ours, who will not hesitate to class the common thieves and harlots along with brethren, as making a part of what they are pleased to term the lower orders. Let them look to themselves—let them look to the gamblers and the swindlers, the demireps and the prostitutes, the intrigues and the corruptions of polished society; and then, even with all the strumpets and pickpockets which they insolently reckon among us, we should still be the most virtuous and best conducted class of society. But we, brethren, who constitute the laborious productive class, do not deserve the stigma. We may venture to say, that not only do our ingenuity and toil provide all the comforts, the conveniences, and luxuries of life, but the firmness of our minds strengthens the texture of society; and as, sometimes, talented men spring up from among ourselves, and, by dint of industry and frugal exertions, get into what is called the higher classes, such men repay the duplicity and avarice they imbibe from our superiors, with the resolution and perseverance which they learnt among us. No, brethren, it is not ignorance, it is not vice, “that unfits us for the conduct of our own affairs; it is nothing but a deep sense, a full consciousness that our own affairs are really our own! We have been so long deprived of our own, that we can hardly persuade ourselves that our own is actually our own. We do not think sufficiently about it. We have been so accustomed to regard ourselves and all that actually and naturally belongs to us, in a false point of view, that we find it difficult to see these things as we ought to see them. This is not because we are ignorant, but because we have been accustomed to error. We want no new knowledge, no new powers of mind, no new doctrines of any sort; all that we want is confidence in ourselves and an exertion of common sense, a resolute determination to look straight forward.

Even in point of book-knowledge or literature, of which, so much is thought at the present day, the barons and the first representatives of the commons, five hundred years ago, were far more ignorant than the majority of ourselves, brethren, are at present; but they depended upon their perception, their common sense, and the rights which they acquired and exercised with unshaken firmness, and with, much discretion. They took every advantage of the expensive ambition of Edward I, and of Edward III. At every demand of the

sovereign, they strengthened the foundation of that power of property which it was long the fashion to call liberty; though to you who compose the great productive power, in which that power of property had its birth, it has been, indeed, the very reverse of liberty. But they, the barons and the wealthy commons, who, under a nominal monarchy, actually ruled the land, had their wants also; and your forefathers, your untaught, brutalized, enslaved forefathers, had sense enough to rise from the state of serfs, from the state of feudal bondage, of hereditary labour, fixed and bound to land on which they had their birth, by means of the wants of their enslavers, into a more liberal condition; and they attained the right, not previously known generally, or even extensively to any part of the globe, of selling their labour by the year, the month, or the day, to any master or employer they might choose. Talk of ignorance, indeed! They effected this gradually in a condition the most humiliating, and under circumstances more oppressive than you, under the most abject of your distresses, can possibly conceive! But, good heaven! This is not to be the term in the career of the emancipation of the great productive power of labour. They advanced themselves and you, their descendants, one degree in the scale of society; but it is for you, by their example, and with far greater advantages, to advance yourselves and your immediate posterity the next degree. But the subject is too important to be entered into as it ought to be in one letter, and I must resume it in the next.

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