

# To the Labouring Poor of England.

FELLOW LABOURERS,

IT is upwards of five years since the reverse print was first exhibited; and, now, it is more worthy of consideration. You have here, in few words, the cause of public distress and a cure for it: you have here a cure for the greatest of national evils, that which has sprung from the maladministration of poor laws. The poor cannot be relieved from their present bondage unless a portion of land is allowed them; and here is a scheme by which this can be done safely and with profit: they cannot be relieved but by a lessening of their public burdens, and here is a mode by which these may be fairly lessened. Had the prayer of the Wily petition been granted five years ago, farmers would have felt little distress; many artificers would have prospered; labourers would have had full employment.

During these five years I have travelled far and seen much, and suffered much. My fate has been singular. I have aimed at objects great and good: I have never forgotten the cause of the English poor; but every effort has failed—every spark of success has sunk into darkness. In Canada I saw room for millions of people: I desired to open a passage thither for the redundant population of England: I desired to see that fine country improved by employing upon it our idle hands; but for this I was persecuted, and after being twice tried and honorably acquitted, was flung into jail and banished without the semblance of crime.—Returning to England, after 14 months detention, by false arrests and imprisonments, I found my affairs, left in the best possible order, in utter confusion: I found my lease of Deptford farm, the best in Wiltshire, given away for nothing: I found my stock valued over at half its worth; and, that half put into bond for the security of my successor: I found myself ruined; and, that my own attorney had induced me to seal my ruin.—Returning to England, I found a provision for my children disputed at law: I twice had judgment in my favour; but, now, the cause carried to the House of Peers, is beyond my reach. I have been nettled and worried by lawyers on every side: I have been beset by government spies and slanderers: I have been weakened by innumerable vexations: I have been oppressed in every way. I have lost my best friends by death, and others by desertion: nor is there solace but in the most perfect conviction, that an evil intention never dwelt in my mind—that I have uniformly aimed at objects great and good. In the midst of accumulating misfortune I have attended in London during three sessions of Parliament, pleading for Canada, for relief to the poor by emigration, and for my right as a British subject. In every thing I have been unsuccessful, yet do not despair. Born to affluence, I am now in poverty; and these hands must administer to my necessities: unaccustomed to toil I must begin in my forty-fifth year as a pauper of Wily, yet do not despair, for there is still a darling hope in my breast, that by perseverance I may prove instrumental in accomplishing the greatest good, by uprooting parish bondage and bettering the condition of English labourers. Being now one of them, they will believe me more sincere; and, in utmost sincerity, I would beseech them to trust chiefly to their own virtuous efforts. The rich never will, generally, bestir themselves for the poor: they are naturally selfish and must not be confided in. The poor, and by such name, alas! must all labourers now be called in this the wealthiest country of the world.—The poor are nine out of ten in every country parish: why, then, should they be afraid: surely they need not despair. They require nought but good agreement among themselves to accomplish their wishes: they have only to hold together, and their cause is won.

Bad as times have been they will soon be worse. Agricultural distress has not yet reached its height. Farmers will yet have less and less money; labourers will yet have less and less employment. The partial reduction of the salt, malt, and leather taxes, is all too late, and will prove quite ineffectual. Seeing a crisis approaching when poor-rates, and taxes, and tythes, may require the whole produce of the land, legislators have been devising methods to lower the poor rates. Last year Mr. Scarslett, a learned lawyer, made proposals for this: but they were monstrous: they were put down. This year he renewed his attempts; but, happily, with as little success. Now, another lawyer, Mr. Nolan, has had a bill laid before Parliament: and this bill, printed, is recommended by a pamphlet. It is altogether delusion and dangerous delusion. Mr. Nolan would punish the idle: would disgrace them with badges; and force poor young men to serve in the militia as substitutes for their wealthy neighbours. Mercy upon us! whither will not blind folks stray! what wrongful expedients will not selfishness suggest! These lawyers have eyes, but they see not. The poor require only fair play: require only what is their own—their natural right, and then demands on the parish would be small indeed:—then the rates would only have to maintain such as are destitute by extraordinary causes. There is no difficulty in determining what is the labourer's right. Scripture tells us, that, "the labourer is worthy of his hire." Then, what is his hire? Is it a gallon loaf and sixpence per week; or double, or treble that? In America I found that a labourer could earn nearly a bushel of wheat per day; but, there, clothing is expensive. Here, where clothing is cheap, a labourer could earn half a bushel per day, but for corn laws, emigration laws, and taxes on necessities. Earning half a bushel of wheat per day, a labourer could house and clothe himself and family: he could educate his children, and enjoy comfort in life; but without Reform of Parliament no great good can be expected. To this, then, all should look: for this, then, all should strive, and act in concert. The cause has been injured by orators and great irregular meetings—by passion and rioting. It could be won by reason and parish petitioning—by the people of every parish petitioning the King, uniformly and systematically. The people should know their wants and be bounded in their wishes. In America every substantial householder has a vote, and that proves sufficient for the security of all. Labourers of England should not grudge to work out their independence by the sweat of the face; and with half a bushel of wheat per day every labourer could, in due time, possess himself of a freehold.

On the 25th of June, 1822, Mr. Coke, of Norfolk, presented to the House of Commons a petition signed by me and 76 other parishioners of Wily, modifying the terms of our former petition: requiring only a rood of land whereon to establish a freehold: £20 for rent: £30 for purchase; and £50 for the erection of a cottage;—requiring only 25 acres to be appropriated in each parish, at an average, for the comfort of the poor—not a 200th part of the land of the kingdom. This would do, and with Parliament reformed, this might be done. Be peaceable then: be patient: be persevering, and never despair. Be thankful for the present that you have the "little-all"—the "minimum of misery"—the gallon loaf and sixpence a week. This will keep us from starving like the poor of Ireland: this will keep us alive for systematic petitioning. Events are working for good, and will soon be propitious to the industrious man. Next winter, when thousands and thousands in every quarter of the kingdom must be out of employment, it will be of the utmost consequence for the cause of the poor that they demean themselves well, and refrain from riot and disorder—that they employ every effort, which misery can strengthen, to push forward the cause of reform by systematic petitioning—by peaceably proclaiming the nature and extent of their wishes. No labourer is crushed as I am: no one has so much to endure; but I will patiently endure, and live, if possible, for the sake of reform. Out of adversity itself I shall recruit my hopes. I shall believe that fate has brought me thus low, to be more determined in the cause—to struggle for labourers, because in doing so, I struggle for myself. No great change in government—no great national good, has yet been obtained but by force. It does not however follow that men may not succeed by reason alone; and this we are bound, in duty, to adhere to, while it is possible. How glorious would it be for Englishmen to achieve this greatest triumph!—reform without bloodshed.

The reverse print was published only a few weeks before my departure for America, from whence I then expected to return in six months. Had I returned so soon I should have pushed on the practice of systematic petitioning. Now that time has been lost, we should be more diligent: time has been lost, but experience has been gained. If we have erred, let us err less in future: if we have failed, let us correct them. In Canada the people met by deputies in convention from five hundred miles distant, and much good might have been done, had not the barbarian government made a law to put down meetings by deputy. We shall here want no such meetings; and boroughmongers will not have face to oppose parish petitioning. We shall give them no excuse: we shall beware of six-acts: we shall endeavour to "be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." We shall begin in Wily: we shall spread over Wiltshire: we shall extend our connection to every corner of the island: we shall do all in good order and peace: we shall succeed, for God will be with us. Yes! if we do all in good order and peace, God will be with us.

Fellow labourers, be of good cheer. With faith you shall be made free. Remember that the first flame of Christianity, which now shines over the whole earth, was first lit up in the cottage of a labourer: remember that this flame was first kept alive by a few poor fishermen. They had faith in the goodness of their cause—in the purity of their designs; and that was sufficient. Have faith, then, and you also shall succeed. The poor of England shall have their right—the labourer shall have the life of which he is worthy.

## FORM OF AN ADDRESS

To his most gracious Majesty, George the Fourth, Sovereign of the united Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, &c. &c. &c.

MAY IT PLEASE YOUR MAJESTY:

We, the undersigned, parishioners of \_\_\_\_\_ in the County of \_\_\_\_\_ beg leave to approach your Majesty with sentiments of pure loyalty, and all due respect. Your Majesty can do no wrong, and may promote infinite good.

With extreme sorrow we have seen for many years the Throne beset by weak and selfish men; and we have dire experience, that these men can bear arbitrary sway in a parliament which represents but a very small portion of your Majesty's subjects. We have heard it proclaimed by a British Minister, that the corruption of parliamentary election was as clear as the sun at noon: we know that its baleful effects have spread over the whole earth; and we feel its influence in the deprivation of every legitimate good. Under the influence of corruption the poor are sacrificed to the rich; and the honest laborer toils only to pamper the idle and the wicked:—Under its influence morality is put down, and the forms of religion upheld only to cover depravity of the deepest dye—under its influence every gift of God is converted into a curse; and all nature lies prostrate before the mammon of unrighteousness.

To correct all this evil, there is but one thing wanted—a parliament fairly chosen by the great body of the people; and, by the principles which pre-ordained your Majesty's family on the Throne, the people have a right to such a parliament.

May it therefore please your Majesty, having summoned parliament, to command a bill, laid before it, to be enacted into law, by which every substantial householder may be entitled to a vote in the choice of members of parliament; and that all members of parliament may be chosen by equal numbers of such householders; or, by others regularly appointed by them. Your Majesty cannot doubt the persistence of parliament to the royal command, when solicited by the great majority of your Majesty's loyal subjects.

No one will say that there is any harm in this address. No one will say that there can be any difficulty for the people of one or more parishes, even every parish in the kingdom, to draw out and sign such an address, and send it by Post directed to the Secretary of State for the Home Department, Whitehall, London, for presentation to the King:—No one will say that the people signing such an address, may not record in print that they have done so, and exhibit their names, that the proportion of their number to that of those not petitioning may be known—thus

The Parish of \_\_\_\_\_ in the County of \_\_\_\_\_ contains \_\_\_\_\_ adult Male Inhabitants, of whom the following have signed the Petition for Parliamentary Reform:

- A. — B.
- C. — D.
- E. — F.

What can be more simple, fair, or effective, than for the people all over the kingdom, thus to show their desire and their strength? Surely, the most ignorant man alive may see that such a plan is safe, and all-sufficient, if followed up by the people desirous of reform.

When in the United States of America, I attended a meeting for parliamentary election. The people met in a church, and were so quiet and orderly, that you might have heard a pin fall. Soon after this, I heard from England of the Wiltshire election:—that it was scarcely safe to go abroad; that mobs of people armed with sticks and stones were every where fighting with each other, and endangering life. What a contrast!

When I was in one of the states of America, the people met in their respective parishes, and in one day voted for a change of constitution; and the new constitution, previously prepared, was without ado, adopted, without the smallest bustle or confusion. Then, again, I heard from England, that a vast multitude of 40 or 50,000 people had assembled with flags and emblems, to excite passion; but without any declared scheme of proceeding—may fixed object—any rational hope of success; save what was to be learned at the moment from Orators, who could not be heard by a fourth part of those assembled. What another contrast! The people at Manchester were indeed peaceable; but were they wise and prudent? Far from it. They excited suspicion; they gave excuse, I do not say good excuse, to violence and bloodshed: they awakened fear; and fear gave the word to massacre. Systematic petitioning can be conducted on rational grounds: it can ascertain the will of the majority of the people, without affording the slightest pretence for violent opposition: it can proceed with safety to its end.

It is 14 years since I first recommended systematic petitioning to the people of Wiltshire, and each succeeding year has strengthened my belief in its practicability and effect—every year has increased hope that the time is approaching when the people will hold together, and obtain what is so much wanted for their common interest. It is seven years since I recommended this plan of proceeding to Mr. Cobbett, the most active and persevering of public writers. He said "it was very good; very simple; very fair; but demanding to set it on foot more time and trouble than he could bestow." When we have set it on foot, will Mr. Cobbett assist?—will Mr. Hunt, with the Northern Union association—will whigs and radicals, all declared friends to reform, lay aside petty jealousies, petty differences of opinion, and in every parish think and act like men?—will they unite in one good, simple, and just plan of proceeding? We shall see: we shall at least set the plan on foot, and give fair opportunity for all to assist. Good men will not dispute the fair claims of the poor—will not withhold assistance out of envy, or indifference, or pride. It is seven years since I declared, that "society must improve from the bottom upwards," and each succeeding year has strengthened this opinion. Wherever I have travelled, in the old world or the new, I have invariably found that the poor were more upright than the rich—that

"The cottage leaves the palace far behind."

How much then is it to be desired that the poor should see what they want; that they should fairly know their strength; combine their efforts; and put all to proper use: not in mobs, to be infuriated by demagogues, weakened, disunited, and foiled; but by mere printing—by orderly and peaceable communication from parish to parish. By such means only can they secure Reform of Parliament; and, by this alone can they get quit of corn laws, emigration laws, and taxes on necessities—by this only can every man expect to have, for his value, a rood of land whereon to erect his freehold. Hitherto the rich have been at the head of reforms, and thence these have been partial and too much in favour of the rich. When reform emanates from the poor, it will be equally for the good of all, and the government will approach perfection.

Till Parliament meets the people should petition the King: when met, they should petition Parliament also, to excite discussion and uphold patriotic members: still recording opinions and names. The landlords in Parliament are now ripe for one grand and most necessary move. The public are now well assured that church property is public property; and that its fee may be made the most of without injustice to any individual. This point I stoutly maintained seven years ago; and it is truly an important one. Church property with some other public property, well managed, might not only afford a good school for every parish, but leave a hundred millions of pounds for other useful purposes. This sum, well managed, would maintain all not able to maintain themselves, besides erecting in every parish a good schoolhouse. This hundred millions, put to proper use, would at once relieve farmers and the country at large—would supply the place of poor-rates. Here, my fellow labourers, is what you can all understand; and, understanding this, your zeal should increase. The true church—the church of Christ, was not founded on wealth; but on the rock of purity—a rock which worldly bishops have defiled. A pious man, my poor fellow labourer! Be zealous; be hearty; be peaceable; be persevering, and never despair. Your cause is infinitely more hopeful now than it was five years ago; your strength is now greatly increased. Farmers, tradesmen—all, indeed, who live by productive labour and skill, be fast adding to the number of the poor. It is now the interest of all of these to join in systematic petitioning for Reform of Parliament. They have been made to believe that Peel's bill is the cause of distress; a wretched delusion. The distress was severe two years before the bill was framed, and its chief causes pointed out in the 4th paragraph of the Wily petition. Now, other causes, and the clamour about that excellent bill among them, have given aid. People have been made to believe that the interest of the National Debt should be lowered—an insidious and dangerous fallacy. It would not benefit the poor to have the national debt violated, or the flame of society broken up. Interests, and rents including tythes, should equally bear the burden of taxation, while corn laws, emigration laws, and taxes on necessities are withdrawn; but the first step of all should go to the right application of Church Property. Up then and be doing, for your cause is at once that of virtue and necessity.

On the day in seven is wholly at your own disposal. On Sundays, besides attending church, you have abundant time to promote the good cause. On that day neighbors can converse on the subject, while the more active go from parish to parish, confining those who do not attend, instructing those who are ignorant—explaining how easy it would be for labourers (among whom may be included farmers, tradesmen, &c.) to carry all before them, were they to join heart and hand in the practice of systematic petitioning. On Sundays, it should be more particularly remembered, that success can only be insured by strict adherence in thought, word, and deed, to the rules of Christian morality. If these are neglected, success cannot possibly be better enjoyed, than in pushing on the cause of peaceable reform—the cause at once of virtue and necessity. Such a conversation as the following could not be more profitable.—A. Would it afford you any comfort, to have a rood of land for a garden? B. A great deal. A. Could you afford to pay sixpence a year for it? B. Yes; that I could. A. Can you live comfortably on a garden lot and sixpence per week? B. You know I can't. A. Could you live comfortably, if you had half a bushel of wheat per day? B. Oh! bravely. A. Do you know that that would be the rate of wages, if corn laws, emigration laws, and taxes on necessities were abolished? B. I never thought of it before. A. It is nevertheless true; but we can have little chance of such abolition, unless parliament is reformed. I, indeed! A. No, indeed; but, to get parliament reformed would be an easy matter, if all labourers, who are nine out of ten in every county parish, would behave as they ought—peaceably and steadily:—if they would petition the King and parliament regularly, at least once a year, and have their names printed in a book, to show how they were going on, and how well they agreed among themselves. Will you do this? B. With all my heart! A. Will you promise on no account to be led into riot: will you never suffer passion to bear sway over your conduct, but keep coolly in your eye those rules which are clearly laid down in the gospel? B. I will. A. If you had half a bushel of wheat per day, and your wife and children in like proportion for their labour, would you relinquish all claims on the parish, for the maintenance of children? B. Most willingly, and for ever. A. Would you labour as hard then as you do now? B. Yes, harder; I would be both more free and willing. I would do more for myself, and more for the nation of course. A. What a glorious change it would be! B. Glorious indeed! A. Let us then be steady in the cause of reform: let us never forget that, by abolishing CORN LAWS, EMIGRATION LAWS, and TAXES ON NECESSARIES, every industrious man would be able to earn HALF A BUSHEL OF WHEAT OR WHOLE PECK PER DAY.

September 1822. *It is long felt to be well on the globe that every man should have a vote; and another time I shall give reasons for this that have been long wanted, and which I am confident will be approved of. My proposal has in view a great and positive improvement in the condition of society at large. The most of all is necessary for those who have yet to build; and for the reestablishment of independent residences in country parishes.*

In a pamphlet entitled "RIGHT OF CHURCH PROPERTY SECURED" published in 1821.

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ROBERT GOURLAY.