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A Contrast of Two Careers

Continued from Page 7

visit to some relatives—I was in the depths of grief, I might almost say of despair, for the light and sunshine of my house had been extinguished. All that was left on earth of my young wife, except the memory of a sainted life, and a too brief happiness, was lying still and cold in the chamber above us. Mr. Cobden called upon me as his friend and addressed me, as you might suppose, with words of condolence. After a time he looked up and said: 'There are thousands of homes in England at this moment where wives, mothers and children are dying of hunger. Now,' he said, 'when the first paroxysm of your grief is past, I would advise you to come with me and we will never rest till the Corn Law is repealed.' I accepted his invitation. I knew that the description he had given of thousands of homes was not an exaggerated description. I felt in my conscience that there was a work which somebody must do and therefore I accepted his invitation and from that time we never ceased to labor hard on behalf of the resolution which he had made. Now, do not suppose that he and I, when I say 'we,' were the only persons engaged in that great question. We were not even the first, tho afterwards, perhaps, we became the foremost before the public. But there were others before us; and we were joined, not by scores, but by hundreds and afterwards by thousands, and afterwards by countless multitudes; and afterwards famine itself, against which we had warred, joined us; and a great minister (Sir Robert Peel) was converted, and minorities became majorities, and finally the barrier was entirely thrown down. And since then, tho there has been suffering, and much suffering, in many homes in England, yet no wife and no mother and no little child has been starved to death as the result of a famine made by law."

Dark Days in Britain

The story of the conditions created in Great Britain by the legislation passed immediately after the crushing of Napoleon, imposing prohibitory import taxes on foodstuffs is the darkest, saddest chapter in British history. Of the many books in which that story stands on record, none presents it more vividly than Carlyle's "Past and Present," published in 1842, from which a few sentences may here be quoted:

"So many hundred thousands in England sit in workhouses, and other hundred thousands have not yet got even workhouses; and in thrifty Scotland itself, in Edinburgh city, in the dark lanes hidden from all but the eye of God, there are scenes of woe and destitution and desolation such as, we may hope, the sun never saw before in the most barbarous regions where men dwell.

"Alas, how many brave hearts, ground to pieces in that unequal battle, have already sunk. Must it grow worse and worse, till the last brave heart is broken, and this same 'brave peasantry' has become a kennel of wild-howling, ravenous paupers?"

Carlyle quotes from the government blue book of the year before (1841) the statistics which set forth the paupers in England and Wales as numbering 1,429,089, and continues:

"If I were the Conservative party of England, I would not for a hundred thousand pounds an hour allow these Corn Laws to continue. Do you count what treasures of bitter indignation they are laying up for you in every just English heart? When two millions of one's brother-men sit in workhouses, and five millions, as it is insolently said, 'rejoice in potatoes,' there are various things that must be begun, let them end where they can."

A protectionist peer, the Duke of Norfolk, actually recommended the working classes, when feeling the pangs of hunger, to take an occasional pinch of curry powder in a little hot water, to allay their inconvenient craving for food. His Grace uttered this famous advice in the House of Lords in perfect good faith and charity, and was deeply hurt when Bright and Cobden made it the theme of their scathing sarcasm on public platforms. Another favorite quotation of Bright and Cobden was this couplet from a high flown poem by Lord John Manners, directed against the Corn Law Leaguers as revolutionaries who would destroy the fabric of British institutions:

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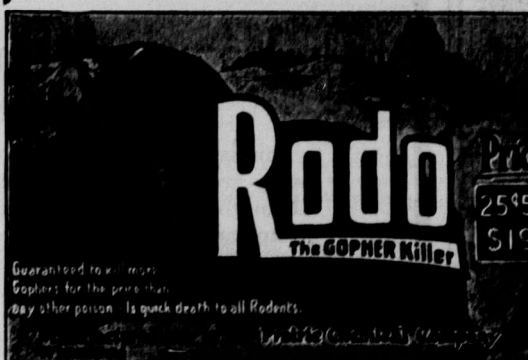


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