ON THE PRESENT POSITION

OF THE

AGRICULTURAL LABOURER,

WITH

PROPOSED MEANS FOR IMPROVING HIS CONDITION;
AND HOW THE CAPABILITIES OF THE COUNTRY CAN BE
RENDERED AVAILABLE TO FEED, AND FEED WELL,
THE PRESENT, OR EVEN A MORE EXTENDED, POPULATION.

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It appears to me that the legitimate and practical object of social science is to promote the comfort and happiness, and thereby improve the morals, of the social body, especially of those beneath us in position.

In this most favoured of countries under heaven, there is to be found a class whose industry, perseverance, expenditure of muscle and sinew, has made it, as far as agricultural improvement is concerned, the garden and wonder of the world.

But has this class been treated as they ought to have been?

I shall answer.

Imagine, then, a fellow-creature, possessed of human feelings, reared in all the severity of destitution, steeped "in poverty to the very lips," and so growing up to manhood an outcast of his race.
But can this neglected and ill-used specimen of humanity be denied the privilege of feelings, and occasionally of the very finest which have warmed the human bosom, seeing that the poet Burns, the Ayrshire ploughman, to whom mausoleums have been erected in gratitude and splendour in his native country, has, with the electricity of genius, touched the sympathetic cord wherever his countrymen are to be found, be it on the banks of the Ganges or on the plains of the Mississippi.

Imagine such a person as that, badly lodged, badly clad, poorly fed, as the miserable pittance he receives is barely sufficient for simple sustenance, far less to strengthen a frame to undergo the drudgery of farming operations. His mind, like his body, neglected; and, from his poverty and ignorance, the object of pity and scorn; from bad fare and hard work, generally aged at forty-five; without all hope of bettering his condition; with the workhouse and its dread in prospective; and death, in his case, disrobed of its terrors, welcomed as a kind visitant. Such a case as this is by no means a visionary or solitary one, as there are hundreds of thousands in this enlightened country who are destined to its sufferance. Even in happy England, our labouring youth of the poorer classes, in the farming districts, know no bright days, no hours of tenderness, none of those periods of romance to which all of us brothers and sisters of humanity are by nature entitled, and without which life is hardly worth having. Alas! for the present position of our "country's pride."
While indulging in this vein of sympathy for the farming labourer, I should not have it understood as a thing to be desired that our ploughmen should be either poets or philosophers; my desire is that this humble operative should come in for his share of those comforts to which his services, to the public, entitle him.

A time there was (and is still in the recollection of many), when this class, at least the younger part of them, was better provided for, when the manners and habits of the farmers were more patriarchal than they are at present, when the labourer was boarded and lodged under his roof—a plan which afforded a better dwelling and better diet than now; besides, the almost certainty of superior morals, being, as he was then, under the supervision of his employer. But this state of things generally exists no longer.

It cannot be denied but that a great improvement, of late years, has been effected in this body of men; and this has been chiefly owing to the active benevolence of our clergy, in the erection of schools and in their superintendence: a change which every one must have observed, and which has not been without its valuable consequences in the case of the recipient, as the labourer is yearly becoming more sober, steady, and moral.

But, while it must be granted that the intellectual acquirements of that body have been improved, it cannot be denied but
that mental training, in this case, has its drawback, by rendering, as it does, the feelings more keenly alive to a destitute position. The question, then, of mere mental training would seem to partake as much of the painful as of the kind, seeing it is comparatively useless, unless accompanied by the substantials.

Having, now, said so much about the labourer, his position, his privations and his prospects, let me, for a little, take my leave of him, and fulfil in a very few words, the promise I made in the title of this essay, the words are, how the capabilities of the country can be rendered available to feed well the present or even a more extended population, and on finishing which I shall proceed with the labourer and his claims.

If the luxury of fruit be considered, that luxury may be amazingly increased by removing the comparatively useless trees which surround our fields and which produce no food, and, by substituting in their stead, the apple, the pear, the plum, the cherry or the walnut. From these materials good and wholesome food can be obtained in the form of puddings and pies, as well as those beverages of our climate, cider and perry, which while they invigorate the system are also calculated to cheer the heart of man.

I should recommend, also, that our hedges of hawthorn, which produce no food for man, but which occasionally maintain an inconvenient number of sparrows, should give way to
the gooseberry bush in its several varieties, which is easily propagated by cuttings, and, when intersected with our native holly and bramble, would form the best of fences, and supply the population with an immense increase of wholesome and nutritious food, as the materials would answer a similar end for the pie, the pudding, preserves, and as good wines as many that are imported, as the champagne and other wines of the light sort. These suggestions then, which have occupied my thoughts for some time, on increasing the comforts of our country in general, I leave to be undervalued or adopted, as may answer the individual purpose.

To return, then, to the main subject of this essay, which regards the improvement of the condition of the agricultural labourer.

I know it may be stated, before I go further, that, considering the low price of agricultural produce, it would be impossible for the farmer to raise the labourer's wages above their present scale.

The reply to this is, that the question as to the rise of wages is not what I want, at present, to entertain.

Supposing they amount to twelve shillings a week or two shillings a day, a sum to which every hard-working man is entitled, I propose to serve him in a different way than the
mere addition of a few shillings to his weekly income. I would give him a social position which he has not hitherto occupied, and so constitute him a valuable member of his section of the community.

It may again be asked how is a change and amelioration so great to be effected? for, if effected at all, it must be at an enormous expense.

I answer, by no means; as I now propose to show.

It may again be asked, supposing the expense not to be of that heavy kind, on whose shoulders is it intended to fall?

I answer, on those of the landowner; and that, in his case, it will ultimately be hardly perceptible, indeed it will be a liberation from expenses to which he is annually subjected.

I know that I must be prepared also to answer such a question as the following. Supposing, then, the expense to be inconsiderable, am I aware that there exists a feeling and disposition among that class to adopt even a practical and sensible plan for ameliorating the condition of the agricultural labourer?

I answer that I am as sure of it as of my existence, in as much as I know that it exists already. By the way, such a
question should never have been asked, it is impeaching our aristocracy with a heartlessness which they by no means possess, as their purse is open to everything benevolent and praiseworthy in every quarter of the globe.

But I say that such a disposition really does exist. It now remains for me to prove it, and to endeavour to turn the current of benevolence which pervades the country in the labourer's favour into a useful and patriotic channel.

At this stage, the reader must be apprised that there is, in every district in this country, one or more societies, whose object is universally the same,—the keeping alive a spirit of agricultural improvement, by conferring rewards on expert operatives, faithful servants, and for other meritorious purposes. As I have said that the objects of these societies are essentially the same, I shall refer to one as a sample of the whole, and it is entitled the "Twenty-fourth Annual Report of the Middlesex Agricultural Society. Hounslow: Printed by J. Gotelee, 1862."

This society is supported as the rest are, by the annual subscription of its members, in sums varying from one to ten pounds. Five pounds is not an uncommon subscription. Two pounds are frequently given.

As the county is not essentially agricultural, the income is not so great as in such districts that are more of
a farming character, its annual receipts being, in 1862, but £350.

Of this sum there were paid prizes to

ploughmen .................................. £39 10 0
Remunerations to drivers ................... 1 12 0
Sweepstakes contended for at Chertsey ... 2 0 0

£43 2 0

Cup to the owner of the best plough ...... 5 0 0
Prizes for drilling .......................... 5 0 0
Prizes for haybinding ......................... 5 15 0
Prizes for strawbinding ....................... 5 0 0
Premiums to servants for long service ... 127 0 0

Besides sundry other expenses which do not concern the subject of this essay. Now as to the recipients of these premiums. To male servants for the longest period of service:

To John Evans, aged 59, in the employ of Mr. George Tillyer, of Feltham; service 46 years; family 5; resided in parish 46 years... £2 0 0

To James Bradley, aged 75; in the employ of Mr. H. P. Baxter, of Southhall Green; service 40½ years; family 7; resided in parish 49 years ........................................... £2 0 0
To James P. Benwell, aged 60, in the employ of Mr. C. J. Taylor, of Scrattage; service 41 years; family 11; subscribed 31 years to a benefit society. ................................ £2 10 0

It is needless to extend a list of names, periods of service, age, number of children, and rewards tendered, seeing so much uniformity is observable, but the same recompensing spirit is conspicuous throughout.

If I am now asked what I propose for the amelioration of this body of deserving men, I am prepared to answer.

To raise the position of the agricultural labourer, he must have an interest in the soil as well as the farmer himself, and to inspire him with such an interest, every well-conducted labourer, after five years probation, and of the age of 25, should be started with half an acre of land, for which a small sum a year might be charged.

I am aware that, on this point, I shall be reminded by many, that, by doing so, I am furnishing the party with the very inducements to neglect his employer’s interests, and by supplying him with this sort of independence, to create in him a spirit of arrogance which he does not, at present, possess.

To this I answer, that it has yet to be tried; and it should be
recollected that the labourer, thanks to our clergy, is a very different man to what he was formerly. Besides, what parent would refuse to have his son taught to write, lest, for instance, he should misapply the acquisition by forgery? Away, then, with such nonsense. By all means give the honest labourer the feeling, that he has a character to maintain, that he has something at stake dependent on that character, and fear not the result, seeing these consequences are founded on the invariable laws of human nature. I repeat, then, give the labourer something to lose, something to care for, and you render him conservative in the true sense of the term.

It certainly gives me much pleasure in observing a start made in the direction I have been recommending; to witness the increasing care that is abroad, to provide the labourer with a decent habitation, superior to what he has hitherto lived in, which unmistakably indicates a good feeling in his behalf.

Located, then, in a comfortable dwelling, and the bit of land I have proposed, to be allotted him, his spare time could then be passed in a comfortable home, instead of in a miserable delapidated hut, and such hours as are not passed there, instead of at the ale-house with its degradation, would be properly spent in superintending his little domain.

Presuming that the labourer has now a comfortable abode, and is provided with a patch of land for domestic uses, the next
point to notice, and perhaps the most important of the whole, is a nutritious diet to which he has hitherto been a stranger. The article of meat, for instance, has long been to him a rarity, limited, perhaps, to a couple of pounds of bacon, of which, with vegetables, a sort of soup has been made by way of feast on Sunday. It is true that the loaf is cheap, and that the certainty of starvation is thus warded off; but man cannot live by bread alone, if he be expected to do every day a certain amount of farm work.

There is no use in shutting one's eyes to the fact, that the price of butcher's meat will never be lowered in this country. The area of the land cannot be increased, while population is progressing at its present rate, and by the requirements of large towns, as the wages of the artizan are good, and which enable him to have meat, with whom it forms an article of daily diet, and, as to increasing the quantity by the importation of stock, about which an absurd notion is apt to be formed, as stock cannot be imported like grain.

There consequently can be no hope for the labourer having a due supply of beef or mutton, but let me see if a wholesome and nutritious dietary cannot be found for him, exclusive of these articles.

The labourer is now, as I have supposed, in a small plot of land, in which he can rear vegetables for his daily use, in one
corner of which he can erect something in the shape of a pigsty for one or two inhabitants, provided his purse can manage it; while in two of the remaining corners he can find room for a dozen of fowls, securing to his family a daily supply of fresh egg nutrition, and some two or three dozen in reserve, to barter on a market day for groceries for the week's consumption.

In another corner of his little tenement, he may find room for a buck and a prolific doe of the rabbit kind, which may be easily fed from the produce of his garden, and which, like the chicken, with a slice of home-fed and home-cured bacon, may furnish a Sunday's or even a Christmas dinner. Bacon and eggs must not be forgotten in this category of substantials. In the corner that is left, provided the locality be favourable, and there are few which are not, a colony of bees may be stationed, amounting to three or four hives, the produce of which would also go a great way to diminish the weight of the grocer's bill. The essentials of tea, sugar, butter, candles, and suet for puddings, may thus, without any outlay of his weekly wages, be secured to the labourer. An extra attention to the fowls at seed-time will meet any objection which may be raised against his keeping poultry. Here, it would seem, is an amount of comfort which might be deemed fabulous for a class of men who have hitherto been neglected.

From the hour these improvements have been introduced, poaching and its demoralizing influences will be a matter of
history, the public house will be deserted, and the union work-house comparatively without an inmate.

But a question may be asked as to the way by which the labourer is to be provided with the means to start, namely, the purchase of the pigs, the fowls, the rabbits, and the bees.

It has been shown that a spirit of benevolent encouragement really does exist on the part of the landowner towards the farmers' labourer, from a detail of the sums which these deserving persons are in the habit of receiving on the occasion of a cattle show, or of an agricultural meeting. But in recording them, were the ages of the parties, length of servitude, and number of children perused with attention?

In the three cases I have mentioned out of thirty-three, all no doubt equally deserving, has the length of servitude, in particular, been the subject of observation?

In the first case, that of John Evans, his period of service has been 46 years, with five children. The next case is James Bradley, whose period of service has been 40½ years, with seven children. The other I quote is James Benwell, whose service is 41 years, and has eleven children, and who has subscribed 31 years to a benefit society. Now, I only ask my reader, if these three cases, are not those of respectable men, the last particularly so, as, notwithstanding his numerous family, he
has shown a rare spirit of foresight, which, considering all circumstances, would qualify him to hold a high position in society. For my part, I should feel disposed to entrust that man, as well as the others mentioned, with any thing; and certain am I, that had they each been presented with a small loan from their parish, or some other fund, to stock their premises forty years ago, they might not only have been able to rear their families creditably, lived comfortably, but from their savings of wages, and other little means which the mode I have chalked out might have afforded, they might have been, instead of the pauper recipients of a small sum, the possessors of £200 or £300.

I have now concluded my observations, which are by no means ideal but a sad reality, and which I have had the pain to witness in various parts of the country when teaching the applications of science to agriculture; and now, retiring from public life, at least in this country, I wish to leave a grateful souvenir, as to what I think would materially contribute to the comfort, content, and happiness of a class of the community whose condition has been sadly and undeservedly overlooked.

The observations which I give to the parties most interested —the landed interest—are either worth attention or worthless; if the last, let them be rejected; but if they are likely to conduce to the health, comfort, and happiness of our “country’s pride,” let the landowner then stand forward, and, as a conscientious
steward of sacred property committed to his trust, perform a sacred duty.

As christians, we all believe that there certainly will take place, and, perhaps, at no very distant day, a great congregation of mankind, when the employment of every one's talent is sure to be considered by our omniscient judge; and I can imagine, on that occasion, how great must be the happiness of the benevolent landowner to refer to his former dependents, as having done every thing in his power to promote their comfort and prosperity.

For myself, nothing would give me more heartfelt pleasure than to be able to visit this country, at some distant time, and to see the class whose cause I have so feebly advocated, treated as I have suggested, to behold them comfortable, joyous and prosperous, but as the ashes of the urn cannot be revived, I can only express a fervent hope, that the seeds I have sown, may not have fallen on stony places, but on good ground, and so may bring forth the very best fruit.

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