

LOYAL PUBLICATION SOCIETY,
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No. 29.

Slavery, Plantations

AND

THE YEOMANRY.

BY FRANCIS LIEBER.

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SLAVERY, PLANTATIONS, AND THE YEOMANRY.

A PORTION of a work, published some years ago by Mr. Joseph Kay, in England, has recently been republished in America, under the title, "Social Condition and Education of the People of England," containing the results of the official inquiries made by Mr. Kay as royal commissioner. The book, as issued here, forms a duodecimo volume of some three hundred pages, and ought to be in the hands of every thinking American at the present period of our heaving struggle. It does not only deserve the reflecting attention of the statesman, the law-maker, and the philosophical student of history, but it seems that its pages ought to be carefully read by every earnest and conscious participator in our great institutions, especially now, when the time approaches nearer and nearer, which will demand of us the gravest task—the reconstruction of the Union: a task which cannot be performed by the repetition of some stereotyped phrase or other, such as "The Union as it was, and the Constitution as it is." No great task in history has ever been performed—no serious difficulty, even in the individual lives of men, can ever be solved—by the repeti-

tion of verbal formulas, stale or new. Revolving repetition imparts no efficacy to the Buddhist prayer; and those whom Cicero called the "chanters of formulas" are not the saviors of their countries. Integrity, resolution, and wisdom, are the elements of great acts in grave times, and wisdom may be learned on some points from the work just mentioned.*

One of the most potent and appalling truths presented and proved beyond all contradiction in Mr. Kay's work, is the hopelessly abject state of the British peasantry, caused by the extinction of the class of small farmers and comfortable freeholders, through the ever-enlarging estates of the few landholders. The Romans had a word for the overgrown possessions of land-owners—they called them *latifundia*; and to such an enormous extent have these *latifundia* grown in England and Wales, and consequently to so small a number have the possessors of land in that country been reduced, that the London Spectator, of July 11, 1863, could publish, as a supplementary sheet, a sadly instructive map, on which the districts owned by the different families, with the names of the latter, are laid down, as provinces and counties are on common maps. There are maps of whole countries, or portions of the globe, which exhibit the different races, or the products, or the languages, or the currents of the atmosphere; there are geological maps; but never before has it been possible to publish a map of land-owners, representing an entire modern kingdom, on a sheet of moderate size. It would have been possi-

* Letters, now publishing in the London "Star" newspaper, confirm, with distressing force of details, all that Mr. Kay, as royal commissioner, has stated in the mentioned work.

ble to present such a map of Italy in her worst imperial times, and of some European countries in the darkest Middle Ages.

Between these British landowners and the vast ignorant, immoral, pauperized, and dangerous peasantry, there is, according to Mr. Kay, nothing but "an impassable gulf." No hale and hardy yeoman ploughs any longer there his glebe. The yeomanry in England are extinct. Mr. Kay shows sufficiently how this state of things has come about, and why the English peasantry stands now, in every point of view, physical and moral, below the peasantry of any other country of Central Europe where the feudal tenure of land has been abolished.

Now, I take it that all history establishes, and all profound statesmen and publicists acknowledge, the following two facts, namely :

A numerous and independent yeomanry—that is to say, a large class of fairly schooled, intelligent, and respectable freeholders, of moderate, yet sufficient estate—spread over the country, with an honorable share in its government, constitutes one of the most important elements of a healthful state of a nation, and is wholly indispensable to a people whose type of government is that of substantial and orderly freedom, most especially so at a period which Vaughan has properly called the Age of Large Cities. The tranquillity of the farmer must counteract the restless and reckless portions of city populations.

Secondly, wherever permanent, large and compact estates exist, whether we call them *latifundia* or plantations, a yeomanry cannot exist by the side of them. Huge estates always tend to the buying out of the small farmer, and to reducing him to poverty ; for the interest of

the money he may obtain for his farm is insufficient to support him and his family as his farm did. Let a comfortable farmer of several hundred acres, well stocked too, sell his estate, and he is a poor man at once.

These are not recently discovered truths. It is now acknowledged that Gracchus did not desire to uproot Roman society by his agrarian laws. He saw the fearful fact before him, that the possessors of the *latifundia* were enlarging their possessions more and more, were buying out the independent Roman farmer, once the very substance of the state, but who, ousted by the senatorial landholder, went to the city, there to swell the worthless, idle, and clamorous population which played so calamitous a part in later Roman history, down to the breaking up of the Empire. Gracchus saw that the *latifundium*-holders were gradually substituting slaves, imported from Greece and Asia, for the free farmer, and, because thus substituting slaves, were turning the fertile grain-growing Italy into a merely grazing country, since the slave is unfit for minute and careful agriculture. Gracchus showed this threatening and demoralizing state of things, presented the yeoman as the sinew of a manly country, and desired for the ousted cultivator nothing more than a portion of the public land which the big landholders had arrogated to themselves, often by no other means, probably, than by fencing and afterwards claiming it as their own. I have seen a similar process of land arrogation by boldly fencing it in, in this country, though on a smaller scale than it was carried on in Italy, where the conquered always lost a large portion, at times the whole, of their land. The *latifundium*-holders and land-thieves were enraged against Gracchus, made a statesman-martyr of him, and blasted

his fame for many long centuries, until truth was made to shine again, and Gracchus was at length restored.

In the southern portion of our country the increasing extent of plantations, the ousting of the yeoman, the pauperizing and degradation of the ousted farmer, if he did not emigrate, has shown itself, as in England and in ancient Italy; with this difference, that in the latter countries the landholders were, or are connected with a landed aristocracy, while with us the far greater portion of the owners of plantations are successful adventurers, very frequently former overseers, or men who have made a fortune as merchants, tradespeople, or lawyers. No feudal law promotes the land-devouring tendency with us, but THE INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY TAKES ITS PLACE. Slavery is unfit for small farming, and profitable only if used for the cultivation of simple staples on a large scale, so that slavery leads to large accumulations of landed property, and keeps them together, although the owning family may change every generation.

When, more than thirty years ago, the writer of these remarks went to the South, a distinguished person of South Carolina—not Petigru, but a thorough Southerner in every way—expressed himself as sadly and as fearfully of the future, as Gracchus can ever have done, to a friend, on the incompatibleness of large plantations with neighboring farms, and of their uniform tendency to destroy the yeoman; while he spoke of the degraded condition of the poor white man by the side of the cotton *latifundia*, almost as keenly as Kay speaks of the vileness of the British peasantry.

The American case is worse than the English in this, that however injuriously the British law of primogeniture

works, by bringing whole districts into the hands of a few, it creates at any rate an acknowledged aristocracy, with some redeeming qualities, while in America the large plantation is kept together by the necessity inherent in slavery, and the *latifundium* shifts from *parvenu* to *parvenu*, using his station and power as a larger landowner for turbulent arrogance, unrestrained by the traditions of family or of the whole society, often even unrestricted by some sort of public opinion. Public opinion—far the most efficient of those powers which keep us on the main road of morality—can exist in districts only which are fairly peopled by homogeneous men; but the large planter, with his two or three hundred slaves, is isolated with his absolute power.

Governor Adams, in his famous message to the Legislature of South Carolina, recommending the reopening of the African slave-trade, in spite of constitution and law, mentions, indeed, the condition of the poor men as one of his reasons for doing so. He did not, however, desire to re-establish a yeomanry. The reason which he gave for proposing the revival of the iniquitous traffic, was, that the high price of slaves made it impossible for the less wealthy classes to possess any, and that thus a dangerous class of men, without direct interest in slavery, was springing up. By reopening the slave trade, negroes should be made so cheap that every white man might be made an interested shareholder in the institution. This message was sent to the legislature about two years before secession broke out, and shortly before, Africans were actually imported again into South Carolina.

Slavery undermines the ground in all directions, as the burrowing creatures of the West make the prairie unsafe

for hunter and team. The small and respectable freeholder is indispensable to the cohesion and permanency of our country. Slavery is incompatible with such yeomanry. What is the natural conclusion? Shall we, reconstructing our political system, sacrifice the country and its existence as the abode of a free nation, to a few land-and-men-holders, or shall we accept, calmly and wisely, the effects and consequences already brought forth by this civil war of almost unmitigated criminality? The war was forced upon us; and shall we not allow the extinction of slavery, or at least the most stringent possible compression of slavery, fixing its utter expiration at no distant period, to be forced upon us likewise?

Slavery is, in this point of social economy, as in every other respect, a disturbing element—a splinter in the foot of fair America, destined still to travel high roads and long. Shall we not extract the inflaming thorn, when it may be well said a far better opportunity is vouchsafed to us than the most sagacious could have foreseen, or the most sanguine could have hoped for—when a great civil war has freed us, and we may act on a scale as large as the war, or as energetically as the wickedness of the rebellion?

Leave aside all considerations of morality, religion, right, and consistency; dismiss even the question of common profit—the reconstruction of the Union alone demands, were it even exclusively upon the ground of an intelligent and patriotic statesmanship, the soonest possible elimination of this estranging and fevering institution. Or are we not in sacred duty bound to reconstruct the Union? Or, if bound to do so, are we, perchance, to re-establish the Union as it was before the outbreak of the

rebellion? If we should wish to do so, reality and facts, altered circumstances and final changes, would make it impossible; and if it were possible, and we were desirous of doing so, we should be no wiser than a man whose house has tumbled about his ears, who should insist upon rebuilding it exactly as it had been—each joist, each rafter, where it was; each unresisted pressure, each unsupported weight, each wall without buttress, as they were before the crumbling of the walls. Those who expect us to do this thing must believe us nearly demented, or they themselves must be closely approaching to that state of mind. They have taken, it seems, for their motto, The Union as it was, the Constitution as it is. A fitter sentiment would be, The Country as it was, the Union ten times better.

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