

The Creed of the Levellers: or, the Land Question in the Seventeenth Century.

BY L. H. B.

We have quoted at such length from "the Epistle Dedicatory" because it contains the gist of the whole pamphlet, of which we shall now be able to dispose somewhat briefly. From his letter "To the friendly and unbiassed reader," appealing for a hearing, which follows his letter to Cromwell, we need only extract the following, from which can be gleaned Winstanley's beautiful and broad conception of equality and freedom:—

The government of kings is the government of the Scribes and Pharisees, who count it no freedom unless they be lords of the earth and of their brethren. But Commonwealth's government is the government of righteousness and peace, who is no respecter of persons. Therefore, reader, here is a trial for thy sincerity: thou shalt have no want of food, raiment, or freedom among brethren in this way propounded: see now if thou canst be content, as the Scriptures say, having food and raiment, therewith be content, and grudge not to let thy brother have the same with thee. Dost thou pray and fast for freedom, and give God thanks again for it? Why know that God is not partial; for if thou pray, it must be for freedom to all; and if thou give thanks, it must be because freedom covers all people, for this will prove a lasting peace. Everyone is ready to say: They fight for their country, and what they do, they do for the good of their country. Well, let it appear now that thou hast fought and acted for thy country's freedom. But if, when thou hast power to settle freedom in thy country, thou takest the possession of the earth into thy own particular hands, and makest thy brother work for thee, as the kings did, thou hast fought and acted for thyself, not for thy country; and here thy inside hypocrisy is discovered. But here take notice that common freedom, which is the rule I would have practised and not talked on, was thy pretence; but particular freedom to thyself was thy intent. Amend or else thou wilt be shamed, when knowledge is spread to cover the earth, even as the waters cover the seas.

In the first chapter, entitled—
"THAT TRUE COMMONWEALTH'S FREEDOM LIES IN THE FREE ENJOYMENT OF THE EARTH."
he sets out to prove this axiom. Amongst other arguments, he says:—

Surely, then, oppressing lords of manors, exacting landlords and tithes-takers, may as well say their brethren shall not breathe the air, nor enjoy warmth in their bodies, nor have the moist waters to fall upon them in showers, unless they will pay them rent for it, as to say their brethren shall not work upon earth, nor eat the fruits thereof, unless they will hire that liberty off them: for he that takes upon him to restrain his brother from the liberty of the one, may upon the same ground restrain him from the liberty of all four, viz., Fire, Water, Earth and Air.

He then refers to the general practice of kings and conquerors, and concludes with the following suggestive summary:—

For you must either establish Commonwealth's freedom in power, making provision for everyone's peace, which is righteousness; or else you must set up monarchy again.

Monarchy is twofold; either for one king to rule, or for many to rule by kingly principles; for the king's power lies in his laws, not in the name: and if either one king rule, or many rule by king's principles, much murmuring, grudges, troubles and quarrels may and will arise among the oppressed people on every gained opportunity.

In the second chapter, "ON GOVERNMENT IN GENERAL," he first defines Government as "a wise and free ordering of the earth, and the manners of mankind by the observation of particular laws or rules;" and contends that "when the right ordered laws do rule, the government is healthful; but where the wills of officers rule above law, that government is diseased with a mortal disease." He then compares the two forms of government, Kingly Government and Commonwealth's Government. The foundation of the one lies in the will of kings, alias conquerors; that of the other within the laws of common freedom. Kingly government "may well be called the government of highwaymen, who have stolen the earth from the younger brethren by force, and hold it from them by force." "Commonwealth government may well be called the 'ancient of days;' for it was before any other oppressing government crept in." Kingly government is possible only by "drawing the people out of common freedom into a way of common bondage: for so long as the earth is a common treasury to all men, kingly covetousness can never reign as king." (The italics are ours.) Commonwealth government is possible only by securing to all the free enjoyment of the earth, and "whatsoever law or custom doth deprive brethren of their freedom in the earth, is to be cast out as unsavoury salt."

If once Commonwealth government be set upon the throne (the continues), then no tyranny or oppression can look him in the face and live. For where oppression lies upon brethren by brethren, that is no Commonwealth's government, but the kingly government still; and the mystery of iniquity hath taken that peacemaker's name to be a cloak to hide his subtle covetousness, pride and oppression under.

And then follows this eloquent and heart-stirring apostrophe to his country:—

O England, England, wouldst thou have thy government sound and healthful? then cast about, and see, and search diligently to find out all those burthens that came in by kings, and remove them; and then will thy Commonwealth's government arise from under the clods, under which as yet it is buried and covered with deformity.

In the next chapter on

"THE ORIGIN OF LAWS,"

he argues that all laws have their root either in self-preservation or in common preservation. The one is "the root of the tree tyranny, and the law of unrighteousness, and all particular kingly laws found out by covetous policy to enslave one brother to another." The other "is the root of the tree magistracy, and the law of righteousness and peace; and all particular laws found out by experience, necessary to be practised for common preservation, are the boughs and branches of that tree." Hence, "the work of all true magistrates is to maintain the common law, which is the root of right government, and preservation and peace to everyone; and to cast out that self-ended principles and interests, which is tyranny and oppression, and which breaks common peace."

All magistrates and other officials in a free commonwealth should, he contends, not only be chosen by the people themselves, but new ones chosen every year. For, amongst other reasons,

It is good to remove officers every year, that whereas many have their portions to obey, so many may have their turn to rule; and this will encourage all men to advance righteousness and good manners in hopes of honour; but when money and riches bear all the sway in the rulers' hearts, there is nothing but tyranny in such ways.

Moreover, "the commonwealth hereby will be furnished with able and experienced men fit to govern, which will mightily advance the honour and peace of our land, occasion the more watchful care in the education of children, and in time will make our commonwealth of England the lily among the nations of the earth.

Worthy aspirations of a great and good man and true patriot!

In the three concluding chapters, he details at length a simple and feasible plan whereby the joint use of the earth, and the collective or co-operative working of all the trade and industry of the nation, might be secured: each making according to his ability, each taking according to his needs. Into this portion of the work, for our purpose, it is needless to enter; but the following few excerpts on special points will sufficiently indicate his general position. Speaking of

THE WORK OF A PARLIAMENT

he says:—

Now it is the work of a Parliament to break the tyrant's bands, to abolish all their oppressing laws, and to give orders, encouragements, and directions unto the poor oppressed people of the land, that they forthwith plant and manure this their own land, for the free and comfortable livelihood of themselves and posterities.

And to declare to them it is their own creation rights, faithfully and courageously recovered by their diligence, purses, and blood, from under the kingly tyrants' and oppressors' power.

And to abolish all old laws and customs which have been the strength of the oppressor, and to prepare, and then to enact, new laws for the ease and freedom of the people, but yet not without the people's knowledge.

So then, a Parliament is the head of power in a Commonwealth, and it is their work to manage public affairs in times of war and in times of peace; not to promote the interests of particular men, but for the peace and freedom of the whole body of the land, viz., of every particular man, that none be deprived of his creation rights unless he hath lost his freedom by transgression, as by the laws is expressed.

Commenting on

"THE WORK OF A COMMONWEALTH'S MINISTRY, AND WHY ONE DAY IN SEVEN MAY BE A DAY OF REST FROM LABOUR,"

he says:—

It is very rational and good that one day in seven be still set apart for three reasons:

First, that the people in such a parish may generally meet together to see one another's faces, and beget or preserve fellowship in friendly love.

Secondly, to be a day of rest or cessation from labour; so that they may have some bodily rest for themselves and cattle.

Thirdly, that he who is chosen minister (for that year) in that parish may read to the people three things—

First, the affairs of the whole land. . . .
Secondly, to read the law of the commonwealth, not only to strengthen the memory of the ancients, but that the young people also, who are not grown up to ripeness of experience, may be instructed to know when they do well, and when they do ill; for the laws of a land hath the power of freedom and bondage, life and death, in its hand, therefore the necessary knowledge to be known, and he is the best prophet that acquaints men therewith. . . .

Thirdly, there may be speeches made of a threefold character . . . to declare the acts and passages of former ages and governments (history.) . . . of all arts and sciences . . . and of the nature of mankind.

And then follows this most luminous and suggestive passage

. . . I, but saith the zealous but ignorant professor, this is a low and carnal ministry indeed, this bade men know nothing but the knowledge of the earth, and the secrets of nature, but we are to look after spiritual and heavenly things. I answer: To know the secrets of nations is to know the works of God; and to know the works of God within the creation, is to know God himself, for God dwells in every visible work or body. And, indeed, if you would know spiritual things, it is to know how the spirit or power of wisdom and life, causing motion or growth, dwells within and governs both the several bodies of the stars and planets in the heavens above, and the several bodies of the earth below, as grace, plants, fishes, beasts, birds, and mankind; . . . and if a man should go to imagine what God is beyond the creation, . . . he doth as the proverb saith, build castles in the air, or tell us of a world beyond the moon, and beyond the sun, merely to blind the reason of man.

Here, however, we must for the present bid farewell to our good brother Winstanley. Though long dead, his work still speaks to us, inspiring us to fresh efforts, by bringing us in touch with our brother reformers of the seventeenth century. It was for doctrines such as these that Trooper Arnold bravely met his death by the hands of his fellow-countrymen at Ware, on Monday, the 15th of November, 1647. It was on behalf of these same teachings that Trooper Lockyer* was shot in St. Paul's Churchyard on Friday, the 27th of April, 1649. And that but a few days later many other of his brother Levellers fearlessly met their death at Burford. They died for the freedom of England; and though in the majority of cases their very names are forgotten, the spirit of righteousness, freedom and justice that animated them still lives, and will keep their memories green in the hearts of a free people, when all remembrance of their judges and executioners shall have passed away. With our brothers in the seventeenth century, we appeal from human laws, from the ephemeral enactments of our fellow-men, to the eternal principles of freedom and justice, and exclaim with them—

Hear, O thou righteous Spirit of the whole creation and judge who is the thief? He who takes away the freedom of the common earth from me, which is my creation rights; or I who take the common earth to plant upon for my free livelihood, endeavouring to live as a free commoner, in a free Commonwealth, in righteousness and peace.

* Speaking of Lockyer's funeral, Carlyle quotes Whitlock (p. 385) as follows:—"About one hundred went before the corpse, five or six in a file; the corpse was then brought, with six trumpets sounding a soldier's knell; then the trooper's horse came, clothed all over in mourning, and led by a footman. The corpse was adorned with bundles of rosemary, one half stained in blood; and the sword of the deceased along with them. Some thousands followed in rank and file: all had sea-green and black ribbon tied on their hats and to their breasts; and the women brought up the rear. At the new churchyard in Westminster, some thousands more of the better sort met them, who thought not fit to march through the city. Many looked upon this funeral as an affront to the Parliament and Army; others called these people 'Levellers;' but they took no notice of anyone's sayings." Wise men truly!

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