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A

LETTER

TO

A FRIEND IN DEVONSHIRE,

ON THE

Present Situation of the Country.

BY A. H. HOLDSWORTH, ESQ.

M. P. FOR DARTMOUTH.

LONDON.

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THE PAMPHLETEER

TO THE READER.



AT the request of some friends, who, viewing the subject in the same light as myself, are anxious to place it before the public, I have been induced to have the following letter printed in the PAMPHLETEER. As it may fall into the hands of persons unacquainted with circumstances to which the letter refers, I have added a few notes for their information.

A

LETTER,

&c. &c.

London, March 2d. 1816.

MY DEAR——,

THE miseries we anticipated are now finding their way to the city of London. I yesterday learned from a friend there, to whom I was talking on the subject, that the wholesale dealers, who have been round the neighbouring districts for orders, are scarcely able to procure any, "*as the farmers,*" they are told, "*are no longer able to purchase any luxuries.*" To him who will look into this remark, who knows all the points on which it touches, it is a volume on the state of the nation; on the melancholy change which we have seen for the last eighteen months taking place.

It tells you, that till now, London had to learn into what state we had fallen: pointing out the height of luxury to which all ranks had risen, it shows to the statesman whence his indirect taxes were procured: to us, it but confirms the first part of the gloomy picture we had drawn, to the finishing of which we have looked with so much fear and anxiety.

But what could any men of thinking minds expect, when they

saw so many estates untenanted, and in the hands of the landlord; others turned into pasture, or tilled without manure; stock every day decreasing; farmers paying their taxes from their capital; and those who have not any,¹ leaving their farms in the night; covenants no longer of any² service,—binding only the landlord; cattle sold to pay rates and taxes, making scarcely any³ return; all improvements in estates naturally at an end; and in consequence⁴ labourers of all ages on the pay of the parish; the circulation of money decreased to one-third; and much of that on the western coast taken to France⁵ for brandy: what, I say, with such a picture as this before their eyes, could any thinking men expect, but that the tradesman must stop his payments or shut up his shop; and that with him the London trader, the import merchant, and the custom house, must inevitably fall?

The landlord, whose sole dependance is on his rents, living in the midst of his tenantry, the bulwark of our country, must cut down his establishment, diminishing his *direct taxes* on the one hand, but his *indirect taxes* ten-fold on the other; or fly, as too many have felt compelled, to spend his small remaining rents in a foreign

¹ Many men who have been thus obliged improvidently to dispose of their stock, have so contrived as to get their neighbours to assist them with their carts; and in one night have removed every thing portable to another part of the country; this is known by the familiar term of “going clear off.”

² Covenants cannot be any longer of service when the tenant has not any thing which you can seize for your rent.

³ A friend of mine sent a man to the fair at Brent, in Devonshire, to buy him one or two good colts, and gave him twenty pounds for the purpose: the man bought seven, and returned two pounds ten shillings in exchange.

⁴ In many parishes in Devonshire this is the case, the men receiving five shillings per week from the parish funds, and employing themselves in the most unproductive of all labour—breaking stones on the road.

⁵ There is a very large and increasing trade at this time carried on from our coast with the town of Roscow, near Morlaix, where the spirits are paid for in English Bank notes.

land, depriving his native country of its circulation and support, and in proportion filling the coffers of a foreign treasury.

Such is the state of our country at this momentous crisis ; at the glorious termination of a war, in the attaining of which the efforts of the statesman and the warrior are beyond all praise.

I will now endeavour to show what has brought about this sudden change ; why estates which were let at high rents, (improvidently as some conceive, who forget that to let under the proper value is to deprive the State of its revenue,) are now worth so little. From the great demands of government for the supplies of the army, navy, and prisoners, the markets had attained a considerable height ; they were certain and regular, and the farmer knew when he took his estate how to calculate its advantages : he knew that as long as the market could be regularly fed, a fair price could be obtained : he was no longer that man, of whom we have heard some sixty years ago, who walked to the market with his basket on his arm, or his single bag of corn on his horse : farming had become a science ; it had changed to a trade ; and every market was an Exchange as much as that on Cornhill : there prices were settled, and business transacted, as in the city of London : and to keep up a regular supply for all our cities, and government contracts, this was absolutely necessary : the effect grew out of the cause : the illiterate men, who compose that society, could not bring this about from their own invention ; but the change of our society produced the effect in them : they were but the instruments of natural events—

But their taxes, tithes, and rents must be paid. The merchant in London, whose credit is good, who is known to be carrying on a just and fair trade, when suddenly wanting cash, takes his bill to the Bank of England, and it is changed into notes : the same system was as necessary to the country. The farmer, called on for his taxes, having his cattle in their stalls and the stacks in his yard, went to the country banker and discounted his bill, well knowing that before the two months should expire at which it was drawn,

he would be enabled to sell so much of his stock at a fair and proper price as to redeem it. And what has now brought him to the state he is in? That which would bring two-thirds of our merchants into the same situation if the Bank of England, alarmed at the state of our trade, was suddenly to stop its discounts. The great glut in the market from the stopping of government contracts, and the double difficulty arising from the improvident importation of corn, frightened the country banker: he refused to accommodate. The farmer, still pressed for his taxes and poor rates, was obliged to draw on his capital, or possessing it (as is always best for the country) in the character of farming stock, was obliged to take it to a market already overloaded: in vain to him to tell the tax-gatherer to look at his stalls, his dairy, and his stack-yard; in vain to him to show the estate without a weed which was once a wilderness; his corn unthrashed, his cattle half fed, must fall under the relentless hand of the law; and that country, which two years since was the seat of every comfort, nay, of luxury itself, must, unless this blow be averted, return to misery and want.'

And here let me pause to say a few words on the difference of the situation of the tenant as regarding his natural landlord, and those who have now unconsciously usurped that character,—the government and the poor. The former, when his rent day arrives, if his tenant is unable at the moment to pay him; if he sees that he is going on properly with his estate; that his cattle are not fit for the market, or the market ready for his corn; will wait until they are. Not so these new landlords: they must be paid the moment they require it, without any feeling for the soil; without any natural affection: like a conqueror in a foreign land, they take it regardless of consequences, leaving the owners of the soil to starve with their tenants.

¹ This system is strongly exemplified by the present situation of the county of Devon, where very much agricultural distress is felt, but where I do not remember that any bank has failed, showing that the prudence of the banker in refusing, on the first alarm, to discount country paper, and getting his notes out of circulation, has saved himself, whilst the farmer has fallen a little sooner than he would otherwise perhaps have done.

But can this system last? If during the last year the tenant paid the taxes at the expence of his capital; if that which when ripe for the market would be worth 50l. be sold for 20l. must not his property be deteriorated, and can he do the same this? Those, who are acquainted with agriculture, well know that the moment things are thrown out of their course destruction follows like a whirlwind. Who can command the corn to grow, or the cattle to feed? You must regulate your manure for your corn; your grass for the beasts; and if the *arrangement* is destroyed the whole system is lost. Need I, after this, ask if £————' were obtained last year by dint of executions on the tenant, or loss of rent to the landlord, whether the very circumstance will not be the cause why half cannot be got now? and that to prove that £———— were obtained for the taxes, without a market for farming produce, is but to shew that you put the farmer into a state to prevent him paying the same this year; and the landlord, either to cheat his tradesmen or put down his establishment, with either of which the indirect taxes must sooner or later equally fall.

And before I leave this subject, let me add, that, as wild is it to say that the quantity of country bank notes have been the cause of our sufferings, as to tell you that port wine is poison because some immoderately make use of it. Without country banks your system never could have been kept up, your war taxes never raised. Some, it is true, as in all other walks of life, have made an unfair use of them: yet those, who cry down this *system* in the present state of society, might expect to raise oranges in Lapland without the assistance of horticultural science!

But, say others, this will all be set right when we return to our good old system—when all again is cheapness and plenty. What does the stockholder answer? You forget that you owe me forty millions per annum; that the Chancellor of the Exchequer requires

¹ It is not any consequence what was the amount of the exact sum obtained from landed property: the argument will be the same.

thirty more for the use of the Government; and that the poor require between' ten and twelve in a direct tax on the land for their support. To those who are in the habit of attending to parochial duties, we need not mention the extent of evils growing out of the *Poor Rates*; and the state, in which our parish poor now are, but too clearly proves how sadly the best, the most charitable of human institutions may in time be perverted. Those laws, once the safe-guard against misery in old age or infirmity, are now the reward of idleness and vice; and not only is the disgrace of going to the parish done away, but the person that can impose on its officer is accounted the most clever in his society. To go into instances of this would fill a volume, and be foreign to the subject; suffice it to say, that if the increase is not speedily stopped, the poor will be sole possessors of the profits of the estates, leaving their natural owners badly paid as their stewards. For it is now well known and understood, that in the same degree as agriculture declines, do the claims on the parish purse increase,² and the indirect taxes diminish.

¹ The Poor Returns to the 25th of March, 1815, amount to 7,023,386, exclusive of 854 parishes which made no return. An intelligent friend of mine takes the total at nearly eight millions; and assures me, that from what he has seen of the increase to this time, the amount for the year 1816 to 1817 will be nearer twelve millions; whilst in the year 1785, the amount of the same expence was only 2,184,904l. 18s. 11d. showing an increase to the year 1816 of more than five times that sum. And comparing this statement with one sent me by the same person from his own parish, which is of small extent, and without a manufactory or town, in the south of Devon, the increase will be found nearly the same.

In 1734 it was 11l. 15s. 9d.

1786——— 35l. 14s. 7½d.

1813——— 134l. 5s. 4d.

1815——— 164l. 10s. 2d.

Which sum he expects this year will be increased to one-ninth more.

² When labourers received half-a-crown a-day, they could buy tea, sugar, &c. and many other little luxuries, which at nine-pence and one shilling, their present daily pay, they are obliged to forego.

From this state of difficulties how are we to get out? When we had the entire command of the seas, when we obliged every passenger to call at our door, we could regulate our affairs as we liked; we could raise taxes at our pleasure; like the man who keeps the only inn on a road, we could charge what we pleased. But now every other country is open to the traveller, when he can stop where he likes, will he buy from us at a pound what he can get from others at ten shillings? Nay, are we so patriotic, that when we can purchase from abroad at half the price of our own markets, we shall not be tempted to do it? Ask our farmer why he gives his friend brandy and water rather than strong beer: "Because," says he, "I sell my barley at twenty shillings per quarter, and the king's duties alone, when I buy it again, make me pay for it at eighty;" ignorantly unaware, that to support an illicit trade must in the end be his ruin. And must we not expect the same will happen in all other sorts of merchandize? for, from the system of those who are engaged in this traffic, the expence of stopping them, I fear, will be equal to the revenue that will be saved by it: the greater the temptation from high duties, added to the want of other employment, the more they will dare, and the more they will increase.

¹ To show the rivalry we must expect in foreign markets, I need only ask what must be the situation of the Newfoundland merchant—Can he expect to sell his fish in Spain or the West Indies, when, to encourage their fisheries, and, above all, to *make seamen*, the French now give a bounty of twelve francs per quintal for all fish caught by themselves in Newfoundland and carried to the West Indies; and as Spain has imposed a duty on all fish of about five shillings per quintal, a bounty of five francs per quintal is given for all carried to that country direct, and six francs for such as may first come to any port in France, and afterwards be transported thither; With a duty of twenty-two francs per quintal on all foreign fish that may be imported into France, and other bounties to their own fisheries not necessary to mention?

Fish when ready for the market, in Newfoundland is worth about twelve francs.

If, then, the maxim be a just one, that you must bring down your taxation to the price of your commodity, or raise the price to taxation, what a picture is before us ! For myself, I will only say, that to face the danger is, I trust, half the battle ; to know its extent, the only chance of finding its remedy.

Let every man who lives on the taxes of our country take care to keep the sources whence they flow in the most flourishing condition ; let him take the burthen from the industrious, or assist them to bear them ; let him stimulate industry in every way in his power ; remembering that it is from the rapid circulation of money that the treasury coffers are filled ; that there is not a money transaction between men which does not directly or indirectly leave something to the state.

Let the public creditor and public officer remember, that when the farmer cannot live, when the tradesman gives up his shop, and the merchant his counting-house, their revenues are at an end.

Let the land-owner remember, that to stimulate the manufacturer, the merchant, and the tradesman ; to industry, is the only means of improving his rents.

In fine, let the idle man be ever forward to assist the industrious with his purse, when, ¹ *public credit being restored*, England shall yet support her character as the first nation of the world.

My dear—— Yours very faithfully, A. H. H.

¹ It is supposed by many that the result of the present state of agriculture will be a scarcity of corn at no very distant period, and that the country will *consequently* be relieved from its present distress. I fear, however, that it will be found to have a very different effect. It is a *certain* and *regular market*, that can alone *restore public credit* ; individuals, it is true, may profit by high prices, but the *system* will be as disorganized as at present. Agriculture, as all other trades, must be confined to the limits prescribed by the capital employed in it ; in proportion as the value of its produce is certain and regular, will men be induced to advance money for it, and in that proportion only, can we, I believe, hope to see it restored.

