FRANCIS PLACE: ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE

IT is curious to reflect how the accident of after-history gives individuals undeserved reputations. Here is Francis Place, with the name of an advanced democratic agitator because he was instrumental in securing the repeal of the Combination Acts, a victory which the later growth of trade unions has magnified enormously. Yet if his extreme democratic friends had had the access which we have to Francis Place's private papers, they would without doubt have given him the title at the head of this article. His intrigue for the repeal of the Combination Acts takes a relatively small space compared with the records of his other anti-democratic intrigues.

Even the repeal of the Combination Acts he justified to himself by a most extraordinary argument. As soon as unreasonable restrictions and oppressions ceased, he believed, the working class would perceive the fundamental truth of political economy—that unrestricted competition made for the good of everybody, and that both prices and wages must be fixed by the law of supply and demand. They would then abandon trade unionism, which they only supported owing to the confusion and irritation caused by the Combination Acts. Consequently, the best way of wiping out trade unionism was to repeal these Acts.

Anyhow, from 1825 onwards, he was chiefly occupied in a most perilous and ingenious intrigue, in which his heart delighted—which was to secure that the working class was induced to support a Reform Bill with all its physical and moral power, and to secure that the Bill as passed excluded the working class from the vote altogether and gave political power to the middle class. No one but Place, probably, could have succeeded in so ticklish a task. He was aided, probably, by the fact that at the back of his tortuous mind he did really believe in universal suffrage ("for which the people are not yet fitted"), and so could conscientiously remain on friendly terms with its advocates and become aware of their plans.

Lovett, Hetherington and the other radicals who consulted him from time to time would have been scandalised to learn what he really thought, not of them, but of their followers. "Vehement, reckless, resolute rascals," he called the supporters of universal suffrage, adding, "among these men were some who were perfectly atrocious, whose purpose was riot, as providing an opportunity for plunder." Cobbett, he considered, was "an unprincipled cowardly bully." As the time for the final struggle grew near, he was alarmed to see that the views of such men became more and more influential.

Lovett had founded a "National Union of Working Classes" (nicknamed the "Rotundanists") which had become the mouthpiece in London of all the working men who thought on political questions at all. They did not find it difficult to "over-trump" Place's left-wing Whiggism when all they demanded was that the extinction of the oligarchy and its rotten boroughs should be accompanied by the enfranchisement of the workers, as already existed in Preston and Westminster.

But Place needed the support of the working class. He was already involved in proposals for armed insurrection (the revolt was to begin in Birmingham while the "London mob" kept a sufficient portion of the soldiers in London by rioting), and for this the support of the working class was essential. In 1831 he was able to trick Lovett's Union out of its position as spokesman for the working class. A meeting held in Lincoln's Inn Fields to form a Political Union which, like the Birmingham Political Union, should concentrate all the forces of all wings of the reformers. As was to be expected, Lovett's group carried a resolution to the effect that half the Council of the new Union should consist of working men. Place at first despaired, but then realised that this resolution might be made cunning use of.

The enrolment of members took place in the usual slack manner at a public house. Place was present all the time that the first few hundreds of members were enrolled. Any working man who presented himself was asked a few casual questions : if he was a Rotundanist no more was said ; if not, he was invited into the committee room and, with many flattering expressions, asked to name a few "honest well-intentioned working men" who could be elected to the Union Council as opponents of the Rotundanists. With infinite pains a list of harmless docile "decoy ducks" was thus secured. The doors were anxiously watched in case the Rotundanists enrolled in sufficient numbers to upset the apple-cart ; but, fortunately, they were unaware of what was going on. Before long there were enough flattered "non-political" working men enrolled to make the election of Place's puppets certain, and the thing was done.

Now he had a grip on a section of the working class he could go rapidly forward. His instructions to his speakers were "to talk in support of universal suffrage, but to move resolutions supporting the Government." The excitement caused by the obstinate resistance of the Lords was such that he was really able to cover up partially the fact that the Reform Bill would disfranchise the working class.

Place's Union could, and did, now speak boldly in the name of the working class, but he was still very anxious to avoid the appeal

to force, lest the Rotundanists in the excitement came to the top again. It was Parkes of Birmingham, apparently, who provided him with the means. TO STOP THE DUKE, GO FOR GOLD, he wrote on a piece of paper; and then suddenly, delightedly, realised he had found the means by which the shopkeepers and employers could break the obstinacy of the Duke of Wellington without calling on their unshaven and dangerous allies.

The Lords stood a rush on the banks for about forty-eight hours, all told. Then they flung up their hands and the resistance collapsed. The Reform Bill was carried: the old oligarchy ended, the shopkeepers got the vote and the working men lost it even where they had had it in the past.

Place's satisfaction was immense; but there was still one thing to do. The London working men had learnt from him a lesson in turbulence which they must now unlearn. For this he turned to his friend, Mr. Thomas, the chief of the new police. He had for a long time been urging him to take a new line against "mobs"—not to wait till they became disorderly and then arrest some who became martyrs at once. Rather, let him arm his constables with clubs and attack any mob, before it misbehaved, and "thrash it as long as any remained together, but take none into custody." "There would soon be no such mobs." These tactics had been tried once in 1830; they were now to be used against the advocates of Universal Suffrage.

The Rotundanists, in May, 1833, determined to hold a protest meeting at the corner of Gough Street and Calthorpe Street (off Gray's Inn Road). This had been forbidden, but they decided to hold it, expecting no doubt that some of the speakers would be arrested and have to testify to their faith in court. They were unpleasantly surprised when the meeting had been held (in perfect quiet, as is admitted) for a short while. Two columns of police deliberately charged it from two sides, beating the audience with their bludgeons. They made no arrests, but clubbed the reformers, as Place exulted in his notes, "for nearly one hour." They certainly made it quite clear to the working class that future franchise meetings would only be held by police permission.

Naturally, not everybody was as pleased as Place. Some of the audience had, indeed, struck back, and one policeman, Cully, had been killed. A most extraordinary scene followed at the inquest. The coroner pressed the jury to return a verdict of murder, but it refused and produced a verdict of "justifiable homicide." The indignant coroner, a Government man, ordered them to reconsider their verdict. They replied that they had already considered it sufficiently. He declared that it was contrary to the facts. They replied that they, as the jury, and not he, were the judges of that.

He stated that he refused to accept the verdict. They answered that they would return no other. So they remained for nearly three-quarters of an hour, the coroner and jury exchanging abuse or glowering at each other for long periods in silent rage. At last, warned by the excitement in the streets and the public galleries, the coroner decided to accept the verdict under protest.

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