The economic position of the British labourer

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THE ECONOMIC POSITION

OF THE

BRITISH LABOURER.

BY

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PREFACE.

The following pages form a portion of a Course of Lectures, which I delivered in the University of Cambridge in the autumn of 1864. For the convenience of the general reader, I have divided the various subjects discussed, into separate Chapters. It was necessary in addressing a class of students, to expound many of the elementary principles of Economic Science; I have thought that many of these expositions might be here admitted.

In the Chapter on Trades Unions and Strikes, an allusion is made to the trade outrages at Sheffield. I think it is only fair to state that I have
Preface.

recently visited Sheffield, and after many interviews with both the Employers and the Employed, I have come to the conclusion, that these outrages have for some years been discontinued, and that they are now most heartily disowned by the working men.

*Trinity Hall, Cambridge,*

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CHAPTER I.
Introductory Remarks.

I purpose in the course of the following Lectures to describe the position of the British labourer. The subject, if I can do adequate justice to it, must be particularly interesting, and one which I consider to be peculiarly appropriate for discussion from a Chair of Political Economy. This science has often had to incur the reproach of being unpractical. The business man assuming a confidence which ignorance alone can give, contemptuously sneers at political economy, and assumes that
he is in possession of a superior wisdom which enables him to grapple with all the practical affairs of life, unh hampered by theories and unfettered by principles. Our science will therefore in some degree vindicate its claim to utility, if it can show that connected with the position of the British labourer there are rapidly arising questions which are destined to exert a powerful influence upon the production of wealth and upon the distribution of property in this country. Men of business are proverbially acute in observing causes from which result temporary fluctuations in the price of commodities, but they are the last to recognise the slow, but not less inevitable working of more permanent causes, which may perhaps be destined to remodel the social state of a country, or to revolutionise the conditions upon which commerce may be carried on.

One moment's reflection will suggest some of the economic problems which may arise for solution during the next few years. Ireland is becoming depopulated. The Irish have hitherto supplied much of the lowest kind of labour required in England. Our corn has to a great extent been reaped by them, but the day is probably not far distant when Ireland will require English labourers to reap her own harvest. Again, it may be observed, that as the commerce of England has developed, a line
of demarcation more definite and more difficult to be passed has arisen between the employers and the employed. This separation between capital and labour is unnatural, and must be pernicious. The hired labourer, as a general rule, has no pecuniary interest in the success of the work in which he is engaged; his faculties are not stimulated, his energies are not evoked. His life is passed without hope, and a discontent must thus be too frequently engendered, which, if not corrected, may jeopardise the stability of our constitution. If for an instant we consider the past, we shall see how great are the changes which have been wrought in our national industry. In former times the English farmers generally cultivated their own freehold estates. They were the old yeomen of England who played so proud a part in the annals of our country, and the yeoman and his labourers often lived together, and thus became attached to each other by some of the ties of family affection. But three distinct classes, between whom no relation now exists except a pecuniary one, are at the present time concerned in the cultivation of the soil. The landowner obtains the greatest rent he can from his tenant, and the tenant obtains from his labourers the maximum of work for the minimum of wages. The employers and employed are parties to a keenly contested bar-
gain, and the labourer therefore naturally endeavours to obtain the maximum of wages for the minimum of work. I do not make this contrast between the past and the present in the vain hope of recalling a state of society which is irrecoverably gone, and which could not exist at the present time; I do not wish to praise the past at the expense of the present. I am an earnest believer in progress, but I have endeavoured by comparison to exhibit in a striking light some of the salient features in our present national economy, in order to show that many circumstances of vast importance in their ultimate consequences are beginning to affect the position of the British labourer. For instance, are our agricultural labourers likely to remain permanently contented with their present lot? Theirs is a life of incessant toil for wages too scanty to give them even a sufficient supply of the first necessaries of life. No hope cheers their monotonous career: a life of constant labour brings them no other prospect than that when their strength is exhausted, they must crave as suppliant mendicants a pittance from parish relief. Will generation after generation be content to pass the same dreary existence, when in other countries, with a climate as healthy as our own, with institutions as free, they may at once become landed-proprietors, and they may see definitely placed