

A

SPEECHES
OF THE
EARL OF SHAFTESBURY, K.G.

UPON SUBJECTS HAVING RELATION CHIEFLY TO THE
CLAIMS AND INTERESTS OF

THE LABOURING CLASS.

WITH A PREFACE.

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P R E F A C E.



THE idea of giving to the world a volume of speeches originated with my friends, and not with myself; and it is only in reluctant obedience to their wishes that I now venture to offer this selection to the notice of the public.

The object is to show the movement, by legislation and other means, towards the regulation of industrial labour for children and young persons, in the interest of their moral and physical condition. It purposes also to give some statements of other efforts made, with the same view, for the improvement of special classes, and of large masses of aggregated populations.

The first Sir Robert Peel, in 1802, after a long experience and use of the system, carried a measure to provide for the care and education of apprentices, who were sent down by barge-loads into Lancashire from the workhouses in London.

It had little or no effect. Sir John Hobhouse, now Lord Broughton, passed a bill, in 1825, for certain regulations in cotton mills; one in particular, for the prohibition of night-work in specified departments; and, at a much earlier period, Mr. Nathaniel Gould, whose name will ever be cherished in the manufacturing districts, had pressed the state of the children on the consideration of the mill-owners.

But the great movement which sought the reduction of the

hours of work did not begin until 1830, when Mr. Oastler, the Rev. Mr. Bull, Mr. Walker, and, above all, Mr. John Wood, worsted-spinner, of Bradford, whose zeal was only equalled by his munificence, appeared in the field. Michael Thomas Sadler at that time maintained the cause in Parliament with unrivalled eloquence and energy. The evidence of the Committee which he obtained, revealed to the world at large all the physical and moral evils of the system. He lost, however, his seat in 1833. It was then that, at the request of a deputation, the duty passed into my hands; and I desire to record the invaluable services of the remarkable men who preceded me. Had they not gone before, and borne such an amount of responsibility and toil, I do not believe that it would have been in my power to have achieved anything at all.

Nor can I, in justice to the operatives of the counties of Chester, Lancaster, and York, withhold an explanation of the principles on which the agitation was conducted. They agreed from the outset that all should be carried on in the most conciliatory manner; that there should be a careful abstinence from all approach to questions of wages and capital; that the labour of children and young persons should alone be touched; that there should be no strikes, no intimidation, and no strong language against their employers, either within or without the walls of Parliament. The movement was closed in the spirit in which it began. The great principle of the ten hours limit having been affirmed by the legislature, there arose no noisy and affronting exultation. Both parties, in the interest of peace, had made moderate concessions to each other. The men embraced the act with gratitude; the employers accepted it with cheerfulness; and to this we may ascribe the unbroken harmony between them that has subsisted to the present day. The great and terrible trial of the cotton famine may also be adduced in proof of the beneficial character of these remedial measures. The heroism and resignation, then manifested, called forth universal sympathy and admiration; and though I readily concede to the repeal of the Corn Laws the principal share in

producing that marvellous tranquillity, I claim (and this on the authority of the operatives themselves) a part for the "Ten Hours Act;" because it showed unanswerably that the legislature had done for them, all that it could do, in the way of justice and humanity.

It was in no invidious spirit that the textile fabrics were the first selected for legislative operation. Everything could not be done at once; the prominence of these fabrics, with the vast numbers engaged in them, had attracted the attention of every one—and it was manifest, besides, that their order and discipline, the multitudes gathered under a single roof, whose toil was governed by the precision and publicity of steam-power, offered, for the enactment of legal restrictions, facilities which could not be found in employments of a less symmetrical and more widely spread character.

Very little was said on the introduction of my bill in 1833. It was allowed to go to a second reading without opposition, the government being determined to issue thereupon a Commission for further inquiry. The Commission being carried on a division, and having reported, after the delay of a few months, the House went into committee on the bill; but the first and important clause having been rejected, I threw the whole into the hands of the ministry. The clauses underwent, in consequence, very serious modifications; but though the measure fell far short of what I desired, it contained, nevertheless, some humane and highly useful provisions, and established, for the first time, the great principle that labour and education should be combined. In order to give the act a fair trial, little was done, for a few years in Parliament (though much out of it), beyond repeated remonstrances to the government, and an anxious observation of its working. It was not until 1838 that, in consequence of official negligences and delays, I actively resumed the question. From that time it was frequently before the House, and passed through many vicissitudes of success and defeat. It survived the powerful opposition of the government of Sir Robert Peel, who threatened, in 1844, to break up his