

THE MOST PROPHETIC LETTER

In 1857 Lord Macaulay wrote, in the famous letter to Henry S. Randall, the biographer of Jefferson—a letter which President Garfield said startled him “like an alarm bell at night,” as follows:

“I have long been convinced that institutions purely democratic must sooner or later destroy liberty or civilization, or both. You may think that your country enjoys an exemption from these evils. I will frankly own to you that I am of a very different opinion. Your fate I believe to be settled, though it is deferred by a physical cause. As long as you have a boundless extent of fertile and unoccupied land, your laboring population will be far more at ease than is the laboring population of the old world, and while that is the case the Jefferson politics may continue to exist without any fatal calamity. But the time will come * * * when wages will be as low and will fluctuate as much with you as with us. You will have your Manchesters and your Birminghams, and in these Manchesters and Birminghams hundreds of thousands of artisans will assuredly be out of work. Then your institutions will be brought to the test. Distress everywhere makes the laborer mutinous and discontented, and incline him to listen to agitators who tell him that it is a monstrous iniquity that one man should have a million while another cannot get a full meal. * * *

“I have seen England pass through three or four such critical seasons as I have described; through such seasons the United States will have to pass in the course of the next century, if not of this. How will you pass through them? I heartily wish you a good deliverance. But my reason and my wishes are at war, and

I cannot help forboding the worst.

“The day will come when in the State of New York, a multitude of people, none of whom has had more than half a breakfast or expects to have more than half a dinner, will choose a legislature. On one side is a statesman teaching patience, respect for the vested rights, strict observance of public faith. On the other is a demagogue, ranting at the tyranny of capitalists and usurists, and asking why anybody should be permitted to drink champagne and ride in a carriage while thousands of honest people are in want of necessities. Which of these candidates is likely to be preferred by a working-man who hears his children cry for bread?

“I seriously apprehend that you will, in some such season of adversity as I have described, do things which will prevent prosperity from returning. There will be, I fear, spoilation. The spoilation will increase the distress. The distress will produce fresh spoilation. There is nothing to stop you. Your constitution is all sail and no anchor.

“As I said before, when society has entered on this downward progress, either civilization or liberty must perish. Either some Caesar or Napoleon will seize the reins of government with a strong hand, and your republic will be as fearfully plundered and laid to waste by the barbarians in the twentieth century as the Roman Empire was in the fifth, with the difference that the Huns and Vandals who ravaged the Roman empire came from without; and that your Huns and Vandals will have been engendered within your own country by your own institutions.”