

## LITTLE ESSAYS ON A BIG SUBJECT

*(For The Review.)*

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*(Continued.)*

## X.

## A TRULY FUNNY SYSTEM.

Let us have the problem clearly before us once more. It is what we call the problem of Distribution. We have abundance; the question is to apportion it fairly. We recognize, to begin with, that there are three to share it, justly and righteously—first, the community, represented by the public Treasury, which must have a share that it may provide roads, bridges, police and all the other services necessary to civilized life; second, the laborer, that is to say, whoever works with hand or head in any productive way whatsoever; and third, the Capitalist, meaning whoever assists Labor in production by the aid of machinery, money, or otherwise.

The condition we find at present (and which constitutes the problem) is that, the first of these sharers seems to be driven to the necessity of resorting to evil methods of getting its share. Nations and municipalities find themselves obliged to tax houses, incomes, food, clothing and other forms of wealth. Besides being an interference with individual rights (if each private person really has a sacred right to the wealth he has earned) it is found in practice that such taxes cannot be imposed without unfairness, inequality, and other evil effects. Besides, it commonly happens that the result, especially of taxes collected through tariffs, is that the community gets less than it needs, and has a deficit to deal with; or gets too much, and has a surplus. As to the second sharer (Labor) we find that his share (wage) has a constant and invariable tendency to reduction down to the point that represents a bare living; and the third sharer (Capital) finds his share (interest) following without fail the evil fortune of Labor's.

To sum up, Distribution as it is now managed—or mismanaged—is, as regards the first sharer, uncertain, and inseparably connected with injustice, inconvenience and costliness; and, as regards the second and third sharers, tends, by some law of necessity, to become more and more inadequate.

Clearly, there must be something radically wrong about the principle upon which such a system of Distribution proceeds. What is that principle, and is it established upon a Divine or a Human law? Having seen the Divine law in operation in the Ant Community, and observing that it is founded on the simple, just principle that each worker possesses and enjoys the fruits of his own labor, we may safely conclude that the sorry results we notice in the human case are due to human causes. It is manifest that the principle in operation amongst ourselves is not the simple and just one above alluded to,

for as already shown, not one of the three working forces—the community, the laborer and the capitalist—is sure of even a tolerably fair share of the wealth produced. This being the case, reason at once suggests the only possible explanation, viz: if those who work and earn do not receive enough, it must be because those who do not work and earn receive too much. But here perhaps the reader argues: how can that be? Is not every individual included in the terms community, labor and capital? If these three get less than they ought to have, it can only be because Production falls short, for there are and can be no mouths or pockets to fill outside of the boundaries of these three terms. This, however, is fallacious reasoning. By the term community as used here we simply mean the organized Government: in short, the public Treasury, which is presumed to be administered for all; by the terms capital and labor we indicate those individual members of the community who are engaged in producing. Is there not still another class we may call Idlers? Do you not everywhere find persons who are doing no hand-turn of work of any description and yet are living in comfort? Do such persons live on air? Do they not subsist on solid victuals, live in actual houses, wear clothes that are woven and sewn? And do these necessities and luxuries of life come into existence by the mere fiat of these Idlers, or are they the product of the laborers and capitalists before mentioned? In short, does it not cost people who work, something to sustain other people who do not work? Assuredly it does, if it be true that wealth can only be produced by labor applied to the raw material of nature, for these Idlers live well, and yet apply no labor of their own to anything whatever. Our society arrangements are now grown complex, and it will be in vain for the reader to look for a class of respectable Idlers who literally sit receiving charity. Such a class—not, however, reckoned respectable—may only be found in alms-houses as things are now arranged. The Idlers in question are gentlemen who are “living on their money.” But let us carefully deduct here those apparently Idle persons who are living on the interest earned by money (itself already earned) which is invested in productive enterprises, for such are not really idle; they may fairly be ranked as Workers, for they are Capitalists. Their money was originally earned by due value given in service; it is now employed in the production of further wealth, and is entitled to its fair wages, which we call interest. Having honorably deducted this class from the ranks of the Do-nothings, we still find a great body of pure and simple Idlers, literally sitting on the backs of labor and capital; that is to say, “living on their money,” but money which somehow is “theirs” without their even having given equivalent service for it; and is now drawing interest mysteriously although not invested in any productive enterprise. Nobody will dispute the fact that we have among us the class described—constituting indeed, all over the country our wealthiest society—and living in this unearned luxury in a most strictly legal way. In fact, it is clear that our system of Distribution proceeds upon the principle of giving the lion’s share of what is produced to those who neither toil nor spin and letting the three legitimate sharers do the best they can on what is left

over. A most absurd and topsy-turvey system, and a most ridiculous principle truly; but by no means a figment of the imagination; on the contrary, a system firmly and solemnly based upon a law duly written in our statute books. What is that law?

## XI.

## GOING OVER THE STATUTE BOOKS.

We are now to look into our Statute books to see if we can find there actually extant a silly and absurd law which provides that he who labors shall go hungry while he who labors not shall be fed. Of course our search is in vain for any enactment to that effect in plain words. To be sure, we come upon one, in which it is in all due form enacted that it shall be lawful for men of white skin to import, buy and sell men, women, and children of black skin; that such colored persons are not human beings in any proper sense, but chattels, and to be dealt with as merchandise; that any white man owning such chattels shall be entitled in virtue of that ownership, to take and appropriate all the wealth produced by the labor of such colored persons, being under obligation only to supply them with food, clothing and shelter, sufficient to keep them alive and in working condition. This is surely the law we are looking for—it seems to fill the requirements exactly. But no; we find this statute marked “repealed.” Slavery has been abolished—Governments have, it would seem, realized and cast out the “wild and guilty fantasy that man can hold property in man.” Well, since we find no explicit legislation re-enacting slavery, we must now go over the books again to examine whether there may be a law or laws which *virtually* have that effect. If, for example, we find a statute which legalizes the private ownership of air, we may consider our object attained, for this will virtually be a legalization of the ownership of men. The reader sees that clearly? Men cannot possibly live without breathing air, and if I may legally come into possession of that natural element, so that I may deal with it as legitimate wealth, selling it, or renting it, or keeping it out of use, as I see fit—it is obvious that I have those men who do not own any air entirely at my mercy. They must breathe or die, but they cannot breathe excepting on my terms—or the terms of other owners like me, if all the air has been appropriated as private property under the statute. To have men thus at your mercy, so that they must accept your terms or die—so that they must, if you insist upon it, give you all they earn except a bare living—is surely to hold them in slavery. A statute, therefore, legalizing the ownership of air might justly be called a re-enactment of slavery. But we do not find any such statute; it could never possibly be passed in any House of Assembly, because it is so manifest to everybody that air was meant for all; and it is so obvious that to deprive any man of air would be to kill him, that no legislator would dream of proposing such a law. Besides, ownership, in the very nature of things, cannot apply to that which cannot be in some outward form held in possession and defended by the owner. There is no possible way by which a man who owned the air, however clear his legal title might

be, could prevent his "property" from being stolen, even if he had all the police and military resources of the government at his back. But, says the reader, why all this absurdity? Of course there is no such law on the books; why, then, discuss such nonsense? It is, doubtless, absurd, reader; but in making this search we cannot afford to pass over any point, reasonable or unreasonable. True, it has never been enacted that air may be privately owned and speculated in. But is air the only natural element which is essential to man's life? No; "there are others," and mark well that legalized private ownership of any of them would be precisely the same as such ownership of air. What are these other elements? One is sunlight. We find no law making this private "property." Another is water. This also, is, in general, free to all, as God meant it to be. What other natural element is there? You say, I do not think of any other; air, sunshine, water,—that seems to include the whole of nature; and all these essential things are, so far as the statute book is concerned, the equal possessions of the whole human race. But stay; what of the world itself? Was that not made by the Creator as truly as the air? Let us see whether there is anything in the law-book on this important point. For, observe, in the case of this element it is not so plain and obvious that it is essential to man's life, and so it might be possible for legislation to propose laws about it whose absurdity would not be at once clear to everybody; and another thing is—very important, too—the earth, unlike air and sunlight, could be practically held and defended, for it could be marked off and fenced in quite easily. Now, before we resume our search in the statute book, let us settle this point: would the private ownership of the earth be the same, in its practical effect, as the ownership of air or sunlight? That is to say, would a law making it private property be virtually a re-enactment of slavery? To answer this it is only necessary to ask—Is the earth really as essential to man's life as air or sunshine? Let us see. What man could do without it. He could breathe and he could enjoy the blessings of eye-sight, provided he had air and sunlight only—and provided he had something to stand on. But this latter condition he could not have without the earth. And then how about food, clothing, and shelter? Water, we have said, is free, but this of course presupposes the earth. We need not add another word; there is no natural element more absolutely essential to man's existence than the earth upon which he is appointed to live and move and have his being in the present life.

However, before we look into the book again, let us have an understanding on another point, namely, the difference between the terms *ownership* and *possession*. If, in the nature of things, there had been any possible danger of some of the more grasping and selfish members of the human family laying claim to *ownership* of the air or sunshine, we might reasonably have expected to find legislation repudiating such claims, and assuring to each individual the rightful *possession* of such air and sunlight as he needed. There is no such legislation to be found, because there was no such danger to be avoided. In the case of this element we call the earth, it is otherwise. It is not only *possible*, as already stated, to fence in and hold portions of the earth, but it is

absolutely necessary that this shall be done in order that it may be put to the use intended by the Creator. Private *possession* must, then, appertain to this element, that is to say, individual men must be protected in the peaceable and continuous possession and use of individual portions of it; but *ownership* must be in every case sternly denied and prohibited. What, then, is the difference? It is this: in the case of private possession, the holder is guaranteed in his exclusive right to accept or use, but on the other hand he renders an equivalent to the community which is excluded; in the case of *ownership*, while enjoying exclusive access or use, he would not be required to render an equivalent. Private possession of the earth is a necessary and just relation. Private ownership of the earth is monopoly. The difference is vast, for whereas by the system of private possession the earth is put to its legitimate use in the production of wealth, yet those who are necessarily excluded, receiving an equivalent, are not unjustly dealt with; by the system of private ownership, both access and equivalent are denied to the excluded. If we accept as a postulate that all men have the same natural right to access to the earth, as they have to any of the other elements essential to their existence, this exclusion without an equivalent is an enormous and fatal injustice.

What, then, has our statute book to say on the subject of the earth, in other words, how does it deal with Land? We do not search far before we find that the monopolistic ownership of Land is legalized. In strict accordance with the provisions of our statutes on the subject, and without offending against any clause of any of them, a solitary monopolist might *own* the whole planet; it would be legal, that is, for one human being to be sole proprietor of the earth, having the right either to collect rent from all the rest of the human family or to eject them as trespassers as he saw fit, and in the meanwhile under no obligation to render to the disinherited race any equivalent for the earth of which he had deprived them.

Such is the principle upon which our laws as to land is based. That principle bluntly denies that the earth was made for the use of all; it as bluntly asserts that it was made to be a speculative commodity for some. It authorizes those who are in possession of the land—regardless of the manner in which they came into such possession—to charge a price for access to a natural element, or to deny that access altogether; in the one case to take as a price all the product beyond a bare living; in the other to condemn a fellow creature to death. Here then clearly we find “actually extant, the silly and absurd law which provides that he who labors shall go hungry, while he who labors not shall be fed.”

(To be continued.)

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