

# THE ABOLITION OF POVERTY BY THE RESTORATION OF EQUAL RIGHTS TO THE USE OF THE EARTH.\*

## AN APPEAL TO THE WHITE SLAVES OF LANDLORDISM.

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*(Translated expressly for The Single Tax Review by Lewis H. Berens, author of "The Story of My Dictatorship," "The Digger Movement in the Days of the Commonwealth," "Toward the Light," etc., etc.)*

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### CHAPTER I.

#### A LETTER INSTEAD OF A PREFACE.

Zurich, January 25th, 1909.

To the Finance Commissioners of the Government of the Canton of Zurich,  
Gentlemen:

From the Surveyor of Taxes of Zurich I have received a demand to pay the sum of 28.90 frcs. as State-tax for the year 1908. I am compelled to inform you that I shall not meet this demand, and that for the following reasons:

As you must know, the system of taxation adopted by the Canton of Zurich has led to a colossal corruption of the taxpayers. Almost without exception rich people pay only so much taxes as common decency demands. Of many it is said that for taxation purposes they do not reveal one-tenth, and of almost all that they do not reveal one-half, of their income and pro-

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\*This work of Gustav Buscher, of Zurich, Switzerland, known to Single Taxers here by reason of his able writings and his tour of the States a few years ago, will be printed serially in the REVIEW. It will be found to be a contribution to the literature of the movement of great value.

erty. Even members of the Legislative Bodies of the Canton, men occupying the most honorable positions, are said to be guilty of the worst sort of taxation frauds. The system of taxation of Zurich practically results in offering a premium for lies and frauds, and in fining honesty. Can any law be regarded as reasonable and right which produces such results? Is not a law which undermines public morality the worst of all laws?

The system of taxation adopted by the Canton of Zurich is based upon false principles. First of all it entirely ignores the fact that the landed classes are profited by the State expenditure in quite a different way from the landless classes. Every permanent and necessary institution, whether of the State or of the different Communes, every improvement and development of same, every development of trade and commerce, every improvement in our methods of production, have all this result, to increase the value of the land. Thus the landed classes are being continuously enriched, while the landless do not necessarily gain anything. That which involves the enrichment of the landed class must involve a loss to the landless classes, the tenants. The higher the value of the land, the higher the rents which the landless, the tenants, have to pay. Thus the State is converted into an instrument by means of which the tenants, the landless classes, are plundered and impoverished for the benefit and enrichment of the owners of our land.

Justice demands that the necessary public revenues should be raised by the taxation of land values. The land belongs by right to the people. The state which permits the rental value of its land to be appropriated by private individuals, and then raises its revenue by taxation imposed upon the honestly earned incomes and property of its citizens, is like a man who allows his earnings to be purloined by others, and then endeavors to maintain himself by begging and stealing.

If you tell me that such a taxation of land values amounts to the abolition of private property in land, that this is not practical, as property is sacred, and under all circumstances must be safeguarded; then I reply that I do not recognize any such right, that the private ownership of land, and the private appropriation of its value, is by no means sacred, but is, on the contrary, the most gigantic fraud, the most colossal robbery, ever perpetrated on humanity.

The private ownership of land contradicts the most fundamental of human rights. Justice demands that the equal claim of all to the use of the natural forces and opportunities, i. e., to the use of the land, should be recognized and assured. For the land is not a product of human labor, such as we can, with equity, regard as private property. It is the basis of all human existence. To make the Earth private property, to shut out one's fellow men from the use of the earth, is to set limits to their claims to life, is a trespass against their personal freedom, is an oppression and a fraud.

The State which does not accord to the poorest and weakest of its members an equal right to the use of the earth, an equal right to life and to liberty; the State which permits the ignorant and helpless to be cheated out of their inheritance by fraudulent property rights, is not based upon Justice. So long

as the State does not assure to all its inhabitants equal rights to the use of the earth, so long must I refuse it obedience, so as not to become an accomplice in the exploitation and disinheriting of the masses of my people.

This is the reason of my refusal to pay taxes. I leave it to you to proceed against me as you may deem desirable."

## CHAPTER II.

### THE CAUSE OF POVERTY.

To be poor is the hell the rich and cultured most fear. To be poor means to be dependent, to be miserable, to have no friends when in need, no consolation when in sorrow. To be poor means to bear insult and humiliation in silence. To be poor means to put up with a narrow, over-crowded dwelling, in which life cannot be enjoyed, in which healthy and invigorating repose after the day's work, is not to be found, in which health and strength untimely waste away. To be poor means to have to beg the rich for work and bread. To be poor means to look forward to an uncertain and unhonored old age. To be poor means not to know whether next year, or even next month, one may not lack bread. To be poor means to renounce the advantages of culture and education, the development of all higher spiritual and mental qualities, to lead narrow, stunted lives but little better than those of the beasts of burden. To such a life the great majority of our fellow creatures are to-day condemned; the majority of them have grown so accustomed to it that it appears to them their inevitable lot, and they scarcely understand what you are saying when you tell them that they have as good a right to life as the rich and the powerful.

The poor people are so little educated, and have been so dulled and stupefied by continuous hard toil, that they have grown accustomed to obedience, and to subordinate their own simple judgment and sense of right to the superior wisdom of the rich and learned, and, for good or for evil, believe what has been preached by both their friends and their foes. Hence they are sunk in hopeless despair, and the belief, that within any reasonable time things cannot be made better for them, befalls the spiritual horizon of the disinherited masses as a dense cloud through which no ray of hope can pierce.

Still, though it may be preached from all our pulpits, and endorsed in all our seats of learning, accepted alike by politicians, socialists and capitalists, it is not true that undeserved poverty cannot be abolished, that what is known as the Social Question cannot be solved.

For what is the Social Question? Simply a question of the distinction between Mine and Thine! Are we really incapable of distinguishing right from wrong? Is it possible that the highly educated and cultured men of the Twentieth Century cannot solve a question that the savages of the wilds of Africa, our own half-savage ancestors before the times of the Romans, even our fore-fathers during the Middle Ages, so often described as the Dark Ages, solved in a peaceful manner? What is the good of all our Science if it cannot teach us how to rid ourselves of the most glaring

injustices of our times? What is the good of a religion that in face of the misery and oppression of the millions can only tell us to have resource to prayers? What is the use of a Socialism that can only console the working classes with dim visions of a remote future, and meanwhile feeds them with the barest crumbs of begged alms? Those who would console us with theories of evolution, who tell us that we must wait, wait, and still wait, are really saying—"I have come to the end of my lesson; in truth I do not know how it can be helped."

The rich who believe that Poverty is a disgrace, are right; Poverty is a disgrace to the politicians who mislead the people; it is a disgrace to Science and Learning brooding over useless subtleties; a disgrace to Religion, cowardly hiding itself when face to face with established and powerful Injustice; a disgrace to all those who worship Justice with words but not with deeds.

To solve the Social Problem, to abolish Poverty, there is no need for thick books full of incomprehensible theories; all that is needed is a clean-cut distinction between Mine and Thine. If the poor people to-day receive everything that by right belongs to them, they can demand no more. But if their share in an estate to which they have as good a right as the rich, is withheld from them, then this estate should at once be taken from those who have usurped the whole of it, and distributed equitably amongst all. The solution of the Social Question is only to be found in an equitable distribution of property, in strict obedience to the great commandment, "Thou shalt not steal?"

To steal does not only mean to take a loaf from a Baker's shop, or a few gold coins out of the till. To steal means to take something for which nothing is given in return, to treat something as one's private property to which one has no real right, even though no human law be thereby trespassed against. For no human law can convert a wrong into a right.

For what is a right? Is it not only a word whereby we attempt to bridle the covetousness of the great masses of the people? Is it not only a concoction of lawyers' tricks and devices? If a right were something real, if it were something different from vain imaginings and inherited habits of thought, then it must have come to us from some other imaginary world. How ridiculous are all such ideas!

So may think those who knowingly mislead the people, and so may talk many of those blind leaders of the blind who are desirous of enlightening the people. A right, they say, is a mere expression of those who have the power to enforce it. According to this theory, the moral sense, conscience, the still small voice within, is but the echo of a deceitful instinct the powerful of this world have implanted in the weak. If this were true, then, indeed, we have nothing to hope for. But it is not true. It is a degrading lie.

Even though those who think themselves clever and wise may fight the idea of right with all their influences, still, the idea of right for ever remains the necessary foundation stone, key-stone and corner-stone of human life. What is not founded on right is built upon sand. What is not based upon Justice can never permanently benefit the masses of the people. Where mere

reasoning may fail us; we have a sure and safe guide in our craving for what is right.

I am not speaking here of rights which find their expression in the pompous paragraphs of our law books; not of those usurped rights which to use Goethe's words, are like an eternal sickness, inherited from generation to generation. I am speaking of the right which is born with us, of the right to life and liberty, which no man gave us and no man can take away, of the inalienable right which is one and the same for all. Many seem to believe that this right is fully secured in the democratic communities of to-day, that in them at least, there is nothing more the masses can demand as a right—and because of this, in view of the still unsatisfied needs of the masses of the people, they despair of right as any safe guide to the solution of the Problem of Poverty, of the Social Question.

In truth, however, the equal right to life and liberty involves a right which is still denied in both republican and monarchical States, viz: the equal right to the use of the earth. Where this right is ignored or repudiated, all other rights will help but little the masses of the disinherited, landless classes. Where the land has passed into private ownership, there the disinherited, landless classes are slaves—slaves mocked by the empty words and forms of freedom.

I am not asserting that it is wrong to own, to hold in exclusive possession, a piece of land. The private ownership of land is not unjust so long as others are not injured thereby. Every man has a right to take possession of a holding of land so long as there is still room for others. But where all the land has been taken possession of, and the land has different values, according to its natural advantages of fertility and situation, there, manifestly, all those are injured who either have no land at all or land of less value than would have accrued to them under an equitable division. The same is true of those who, in fact, are but the apparent owners, who have to give up so much of the yield of their land, under the guise of interest on mortgages, to its real owners. All these are being robbed, for Justice demands that the equal claim of all to the use of the earth and to share in the value which the needs and activities of all give to the land, shall be recognized, respected, and assured.

In earlier times, as all of those who read the Bible must know, they attempted to safeguard themselves against the inequality of private property in land by periodically dividing the land equally amongst all the citizens. To-day such a remedy is no longer practical. The value of the land is too unequal, the needs of individuals are too varied. An equal division of the land is quite incompatible, utterly irreconcilable with the social, industrial and business life of the present day. But there is a means by which the equal right of all to the use of the earth may be satisfied in the most perfect manner, and that with the least possible shock to existing conditions, without driving anybody out of his possessions, without any disturbance of our industrial life. And that is by appropriating for public purposes the publicly created rental value of the land, the so-called "unearned increment" of the landed classes, by means of the Taxation of Land Values.

He who has a valuable landed estate can draw from it an income even though he himself may do nothing. In our large towns, the ownership of a few hundred square yards exempts the owner during his whole life from the trouble of working. He need not save to accumulate capital; the whole community is saving for him. His possession gives him the power to exact a tribute from those who want to live and work on his land. The higher the tribute, whether paid voluntarily or involuntarily, the higher is the value of the land.

To give to a man the power to levy tribute on his fellow-men, is manifestly a violation of justice. And this violation grows gigantic, and gains a giant's strength, when it becomes a question of levying tribute to the amount of millions and hundreds of millions, depriving the disinherited of every possibility of earning a living, imposing on them an exorbitant tax, which scarcely leaves them sufficient to maintain life, which reduces them, in fact, to the level of serfs, whilst deceiving and dazzling them with a pretence of freedom and equality.

This is no heated, passionate, one-sided exaggeration. It is the plain, naked truth.

Imagine for a moment that you, my reader, were the only one saved from a shipwreck, which cast you upon a lonely little island. A man approaches, addresses you in your mother tongue, and says, "I make you my slave." You would be indignant, and demand of him whence he gained the right to rob you of your freedom. But if he should say, "I regard you as a free man, and I would draw your attention to the fact that this island is my private property," you might be inclined to recognize this claim. In doing so, however, you would place yourself in exactly the same position as if the man had made you his slave. The mere order—"Quit my property," would be your death sentence.

You may, perhaps, say, that may be all right in theory, but in real life such cases do not occur. But that is not true. In real life such cases occur every day.

In our large towns, as well as in our rural districts, the vast majority of our people live and work on land that does not belong to them. From time to time, according to the market, the tenants receive from the land-owner, notice of a rise in their rent, that is, the order—"Quit my property, or pay the tribute I have fixed." The ever increasing rise in rent forces the poorer amongst our people into more over-crowded, more dirty and more unhealthy dwellings. Every increase in rent imposes upon them increased privations. Thousands slowly perish for want of space, light and air. In order to pay the rent, the inexorable rent, they must economize even in bread and milk, and other of their scanty food supplies. Pale-faced girls must work till they break down, men decay, and women fade away in these slums, the children die like flies in autumn, often to the relief of their parents. Daily, hourly the death sentence is pronounced by the owners of the site of our large towns; daily, hourly it is fulfilled.

Those who would gain any real idea of the gigantic wrong perpetrated by

society on the helpless and disinherited, should visit them in their dwelling places, in their homes, as by courtesy they must be called. Fixed in my memory remains such a picture, a family of workers, who gave friendly and intelligent replies to my questionings, and whose eyes sparkled with gratitude that someone should come and be interested in their fate. A family of seven or eight persons, crowded together in an unspeakably dirty room with only two beds, if one may so term two heaps of evil smelling rags, in two dirty old wooden boxes. The dirt and the evil smells are but a necessary consequence of his calling, for the man is a rag collector, who leaves at three or four o'clock in the morning, by the light of the gas lamps or the dawn, to roam the streets for refuse. At home the refuse is sorted out by the family. In the whole dwelling there is but one chair on which one can safely sit down. The children are dirty, covered with rash, but during my stay behaved themselves surprisingly well. They are playing with one another without the least noise or quarrelling, and occasionally glance at me with shy curiosity. There was no trace of alcohol or brutality, or even of vulgarity in the behavior of these unfortunate people.

Not far from the rag gatherer's house there is a town of booths. Here the homeless have built themselves dwellings of canvas, cardboard and wooden poles. Bending, I crept beneath a dirty sail-cloth curtain into one of the better houses of this strange colony. What a sight! The whole house is a small narrow room, in which there is scarce room to turn between a table and a cradle. The whole of the household goods would not fetch ten francs at auction. Only the wife is at home. She tells me that her husband is a bricklayer, who, when he has work earns a few francs daily; that throughout all Paris they could find no dwelling place within their means, and therefore had moved into this booth, which her husband had built himself. For the use of the land they paid a monthly rent, the amount of which I have forgotten. The woman seemed to be a good mother, for on the table there were several bottles of milk, which is very dear in Paris, and the children seemed well nourished. But when I sat down to my own meal that evening, I felt an involuntary and unaccustomed choking in the throat.

From my own experiences and from a thousand narratives, I know that it is nowhere much better, and that in every large town, you can find human dwelling places in which a rich man would not kennel his dogs. I also know that the majority of rich and cultured people would rather think and talk of something else. I know that if a man is killed, through greed or through revenge, from good or from bad motives, the police are called in and everything is done to call the culprit to account. And I know that the avarice of the land-owners of our large towns murder more people every year than have been killed by thieves and murderers during the past ten generations.

"The land shall not be sold forever," says the Bible, "for the land is mine, and ye are but strangers and sojourners with me, says the Lord thy God." Every great thinker who has considered the question has rejected the private ownership of land, and branded it as immoral, or anti-social. Moses

and Aristotle, Spinoza and Rousseau, are but some of the enlightened minds who may be cited as witnesses against private property in land. Why do the bourgeoisie not listen to the voice of these men whom they profess to honor so much? And the pious people, who deem every verse in the Bible to be divinely inspired, why do they pass over just this very verse which forbids so solemnly the sale of the earth?

Is it because to them Science is but a servant of their greed, Learning but a cloak to cover their covetousness, Religion but a mantle beneath which to hide their evil-doings, their fine words about Liberty and Justice but the veriest hypocrisy, and all their sermons on Brotherly Love but pleasant sounding lies?

*(To be continued.)*

## LITTLE ESSAYS ON A BIG SUBJECT

*(For The Review.)*

By J. W. BENGOUGH.

*(Continued.)*

### XII.

GENTLE READER, GO GENTLY!

I am flattering myself that the reader has been so courteous and so patient as to have followed me through the preceding eleven Little Essays. At the close of the eleventh, however, both courtesy and patience have given way, and there has been an explosion of "Pshaw! More wild, meaningless anarchy! This writer, too, would denounce our land laws, and abolish private ownership of land, thereby removing the basis on which society rests, and converting civilization into chaos and confusion!"

Gentle Reader, go gently. Have you already forgotten the vast distinction between Ownership and Possession? Society needs no ampler basis than that individual men shall be defended in the peaceable possession of the portions of land they now have possession of. This the law must certainly provide for; it is the first condition of civilization. A man's right to hold and enjoy his land, to keep it or part with it, to pass it on to his heirs, and to be protected in this right by the whole force of the Government, must be held sacred. But the law must be based on justice all around, not merely to the man who holds the land in his possession, but to the other man who thereby is excluded from it, as well. And this justice requires, therefore, that the land possessor shall render an equivalent to the non-possessor, that is, to the public Treasury, as representing all; for only by the payment of such equivalent can the equal right of all which is thus foregone, be acknowledged and vindicated.