

"MY IDEA OF FREEDOM"

A CONTRIBUTION TO A LITERARY SOCIETY SYMPOSIUM.

The man cast on a desert island might consider himself "free" in the sense that there is no one to curtail or interfere with his actions. He is in a state of absolute liberty to think what he likes, write what he likes, do what he likes, produce what he likes, and worship any god he likes. He would be both monarch and subject, both priest and layman; neither taxpayer nor tax-gatherer; neither landlord nor tenant. One could say at best that he was independent, isolated, or cut off. He knows neither freedom nor bondage, justice nor injustice, for these are attributes of society and he is no part of that. He would be "free" true enough, but not in the sense that "freedom" is spoken of as a thing pertaining to human life.

I introduce this picture of isolated man in order to clear away one of the misconceptions that are often entertained in regard to freedom—misconceptions that make cynics and are used by them to belittle the cause of human liberty. The confounding of freedom with independence leads at once to the conclusion that freedom is both absurd and impossible. Freedom by this showing can only be enjoyed by a man alone on an island, alone in the mountains or alone on a prairie, because freedom is a private belonging which a man can only carry about him if he is alone. He who, as it were, comes down from the mountains or leaves the prairie to enter civilisation must make (so it is alleged) what I understand Rousseau to call "the social contract" by which he surrenders his rights to liberty and hands them over as a joint possession of the community. Any freedom he then enjoys is by favour of the State and he can claim none as an individual.

Freedom is synonymous with liberty. It is not synonymous with independence; if it were, it could easily be corrupted to mean its exact contrary, licence or privilege. And so the confusion goes on. Freedom being shunned by the mere cynic or reactionary is condemned for almost similar reasons by those whom, for want of a better name, I should describe as Socialists. The latter contend that individual liberty cannot and must not exist because it is dangerous to and destructive of society, giving scope to the strong and the unscrupulous to exploit and enslave. This view does in fact deny and repudiate freedom. In the society of men, every man cannot of course do absolutely what he likes. It is a physical impossibility. Only *some* men can be so independent and then they are not "free" men. They are licensed or privileged men setting at naught the rights of others. They become the masters of others economically and politically, taking under their so-called freedom what others produce, dictating to others what lives they must lead, what they must say and think, how they must vote, and in the end, establishing themselves as despots and bandits.

My idea of freedom is that it is not independence, it is not licence, it is not privilege. My idea of freedom is that of a relationship among human beings which is

a necessary accompaniment of healthy, progressive, prosperous and happy union among the individuals and peoples of the earth. This relationship is thus expressed by Herbert Spencer in his first book, *SOCIAL STATICS*—"Every man has freedom to do all that he wills provided he infringes not the equal liberty of any other man." I want you to note the reservation. It is of the utmost importance and it is the essential core of the definition. Without it freedom cannot be defined, although it can still be expressed and illustrated in many ways, among which the most beautiful is that exhortation made 2,000 years ago, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

When you ask me what I conceive freedom to be or what is "My Idea of Freedom," I can only tell you as I have done in so many words. What my idea connotes is quite another story. I can only ask you whether the principle laid down is wise and just, and if it is, to apply it to the uttermost in every field of human thought and action. Freedom is the binding link, the sacred union between members of society, which safeguards the rights of each to the control of his own destiny as an equal citizen in government, and an equal partner in the bounties of nature.

Freedom is an ideal possible of attainment, and indeed without it civilisation is doomed to destruction. Society may grow in circumstances where privilege, having over-ridden freedom or prevented its existence, allows superior claims to some, whereby they own nature itself or man himself and so levy tribute on their fellows. It may grow in circumstances where the mass of men are disfranchised from a voice in public affairs. But such a society produces the great division and the great contrast seen in the palace and the slum, the millionaire and the tramp, the land monopolist and the landless, the political dictator and the docile subject, the house of have and the house of have not. It may grow but it cannot abide. It is based on injustice and bears the seed of its own downfall. It is for this reason that all the great civilisations of the past were destroyed. Justice was not and freedom was not. The moral law was disobeyed and exacted inevitable punishment. And here is another thought to be followed out if there were time—that those ancient commandments called the Commandments of Moses are no mere parliamentary Act which men can pass and repeal. They are natural laws which must be observed if society is to live and if human kind are to replenish the earth. "Thou shalt not steal"; "Thou shalt not kill"; what are these "laws" but a mere statement of fact? The breach of these laws is a denial of freedom and with that the end of human civilisation and the reversion to barbarism.

No! Freedom, as I have defined it and wish it to be defined is an essential relationship between men and men. Human progress consists in association in equality. We have to live in dependence on others and with others in dependence on us. Co-operation in the making and exchanging of things, in the uttering and dissemination of thought, is the be-all and end-all of civilisation. And all those benefits which come from civilisation can only be bestowed on all without

distinction or favour (as they should be) where freedom prevails. I contest the doctrine that man surrenders his own freedom when he enters society. When he is born into it, he makes no social contract. He brings with him and retains his freedom to do what he wills, provided he respects the equal freedom of every one else. That freedom is as inseparable from him as his shadow. It may be arbitrarily taken from him by a government or by what is so loosely called the "State" but as a fundamental, inalienable right it exists all the same.

The extension of that idea of freedom goes very wide and very deep. In this country we have fought for many liberties. Liberty of the press, liberty of conscience, and liberty of the vote. Men have worked and died for political liberty and they have achieved much. But freedom is yet incomplete.

Political democracies, that is, where men have only political freedom, show the same divergence between wealth and poverty as the most autocratic despotisms, and there the cause of human emancipation is not yet won. Why this is, I can only ask you again to explain for yourselves in the light of the pure conception of freedom. Make the application to the means by which alone wealth is produced—the use of land by labour—and you will find that the ideal relationship of freedom may easily be breached and broken. The man who engrosses land and calls it his, who thereupon charges a price to others before they can use it, denies equal freedom to his fellows. They are no longer able to do as they will. They can make for themselves no sustenance, except with the permission of one who can live upon their labour without himself producing, except a class is created who are parasites on society. And given private property in land, there follow all the evils of monopoly; rents paid over to those who have no moral right to such wealth, all the evils resulting from the withholding of land from use, all the evils of poverty and the fear of poverty. By the denial of freedom, made the greater irony by the flaunting of political liberty (as the last gracious concession of the benevolent owners of the earth) a wedge is driven right through society which ever makes the wealthy wealthier and the poor poorer.

Political and religious freedom are not enough. They bring no fruits to the altar where they are divorced from economic freedom. As stated in **PROGRESS AND POVERTY** :—

Equality of political rights will not compensate for the denial of the equal right to the bounty of nature. Political liberty, when equal right to land is denied, becomes, as population increases and invention goes on, merely the liberty to compete for employment at starvation wages. This is the truth that we have ignored. And so there come beggars in our streets and tramps on our roads; and poverty enslaves men whom we boast are political sovereigns; and want breeds ignorance that our schools cannot enlighten; and citizens vote as their masters dictate; and the demagogue usurps the part of the statesman; and gold weighs in the scales of justice; and in high places sit those who do not pay to civic virtue even the compliment of hypocrisy; and the pillars of the republic that we thought so strong already bend under an increasing strain.

And again there is this grave warning :—

In our time, as in times before, creep on the insidious forces that, producing inequality, destroy liberty. On the horizon the clouds begin to lower. Liberty calls to us again. We must follow her further; we must trust her fully. Either we must fully accept her or she will not stay. It is not enough that men should vote; it is not enough that they should be theoretically equal before the law. They must have liberty to avail themselves of the opportunities and means of life. They must stand on equal terms with reference to the bounty of nature. Either this, or liberty withdraws her light; either this, or darkness comes on, and the very forces that progress has evolved turn to powers that work destruction. This is the universal law. This is the lesson of the centuries. Unless its foundations be laid in justice, the social structure cannot stand.

Unless its foundations be laid in justice its foundations cannot stand. I close with that word. Freedom is justice, and until there is justice there can be no freedom. I spoke of freedom as a relationship, as an essential connecting link. What is true of freedom is true of justice too, for as Montesquieu says: "Justice is a relation of congruity which really subsists between two things. This relation is always the same, whatever being considers it, whether it be God, or an angel, or lastly a man."

A. W. M.

OUR OBJECT

To promote the Taxation of Land Values in lieu of other taxes.

A tax on land values is not a tax on land, but on the value of land. Thus it would not fall on all land, but only on valuable land, and on that not in proportion to the use made of it, but in proportion to its value. It would thus be a tax, not on the use or improvement of land, but on the ownership of land, taking what would otherwise go to the owner as owner, and not as a user of the land.

In assessments under the Taxation of Land Values all value created by individual use or improvement would be excluded, and the only value taken into consideration would be the value attaching to the bare land by reason of neighbourhood, public improvements, &c. Thus the farmer would have no more taxes to pay than the speculator who held a similar piece of land idle, and the man who on a city plot erected a valuable building would be taxed no more than the man who held a similar block vacant.

The Taxation of Land Values, in short, would call upon men to contribute to the public revenues, not in proportion to what they produce or accumulate, but in proportion to the value of the natural opportunities they hold. It would compel them to pay just as much for holding land idle as for putting it to the fullest use.

By taking for public uses that value which attaches to land by reason of the growth and improvement of the community, it would make the holding of land unprofitable to the mere owner, and profitable only to the user. It would thus make it impossible for speculators and monopolists to hold natural opportunities—such as valuable land—unused or only half used, and would throw open to labour the illimitable field of employment which the earth offers to man.