

THE LAND QUESTION IN GERMANY.

THE PEASANTS' REVOLT OF 1525.

STUDENTS of history would do well to bear in mind that every Religion which has ever attempted to bind or to guide the reason, to direct the lives, and to determine the conscience of mankind, has an ethical as well as a theological, a social as well as an individual or personal side. It necessarily concerns itself, not only with the relation of the individual man to God or the gods, but also with the relations of man to man. Morality is essentially a question of human relationship; it owes its origin to the necessities and exigencies of social life. Without some obedience to the dictates of the fundamental principles of morality, with some recognition of the claims of others, voluntary social union, based as it is on peaceful association and co-operation, remains impossible. Our conceptions of morality, however, like our spiritual and theological conceptions, necessarily vary with our intellectual development. But, as Professor Caird expresses it: "It would be absurd to say that at any time man's relations to the beings he conceived as divine has not had a determining influence on his view of his relations to his fellow-men, and of the conduct therefore incumbent on him." Hence the close relations and inter-relations, at all events where religious beliefs are a real living force, of religion and politics. In its widest sense, politics is the art or act of regulating and determining the social relations of mankind; it is neither more nor less than the application of certain religious or ethical principles in the domain of social life. Hence we can account for the suggestive fact, a fact which has forced itself on the attention of every serious student of history, that almost every religious revival, every application of reason to religion, which must necessarily emphasise its ethical or social side; every attempt made in Europe to conform theological dogmas to the teachings of the Scriptures, has been followed by an uprising of the disinherited masses against the tyranny and oppression of the ruling and privileged classes. The teachings of Wiclif, which paved the way for the Reformation in England, were followed by the insurrection of the Commons, associated with the name of Wat Tyler; the teachings of Luther and the other early Reformers, by the Peasant's Revolt.†

To the economic and social causes of the unrest and repeated uprisings of the peasants and labouring classes during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, we can refer only very briefly. At the time of the great migration of the fifth century, the barbarian nations were organised on a tribal and village basis. By the end of the tenth century, however, what is known as the Feudal System had been established all over Europe. "No land without a lord," was the underlying principle of the whole feudal organisation. Either by conquest, or more or less compulsory agreement, even the free primitive communities (die Markgenossenschaften) of the Teutonic races, had come under the dominion of the Lords, spiritual or temporal, claiming suzerainty over the territory in which they were situated. The claims of the Feudal Magnates seem ever to have been somewhat vague and arbitrary. At first they were comparatively light, and may well have been regarded and excused as a return for services rendered; but the general tendency was for the individual power of the Lords to extend itself at the cost of the rural community, and for their claims steadily to increase. During the fourteenth century many causes combined to improve the condition of the labouring classes generally; and during the fifteenth century the condition of the peasant and artisan in Northern and Western

Europe was better than it has been before or since:‡ wages were comparatively high, employment plentiful, food and other necessities of life abundant and cheap. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, however, owing to many causes, the prices of the necessities and comforts of life had risen enormously, and there had been no proportionate increase in the earnings of the labouring classes. The Feudal Lords, moreover, had commenced to exercise their oppressive power in a hitherto unheard of manner. Old rights of pasture, of gathering wood and cutting timber, of hunting and fishing, and so on, had not only been greatly curtailed, but in many cases entirely swept away. Tithes and other manorial dues had been doubled and trebled; fresh burdens, many of them entirely opposed to ancient use and wont, had been imposed; and the peasants and labouring classes wronged and oppressed in countless different ways.

In Germany, as indeed in all other parts of Feudal Europe, the peasantry of the period were of three different kinds. Serfs (Leibeigener), who were little better than slaves, and who were bought and sold with the land they cultivated; villeins (Höriger) whose services were assumed to be fixed and limited; and the free peasant (die Freier) whose counterpart in England was the mediaeval copyholder, who either held his land from some Feudal Lord, to whom he paid a quit-rent in kind or in money, or who paid such a rent for permission to retain his holding in the rural community under the protection of the lord. To appreciate the state of mind of all such people at the time of which we are writing, we must remember that the "good old times" of the fifteenth century were still green in their minds, from which, indeed, the memory of their ancient freedom and primitive communism, though little more than a tradition, had never entirely vanished; which sufficiently accounts, not only for their impatience of the new burdens, but for their tendency to regard all feudal claims as direct infringements of their ancient rights and privileges.

In 1525 the peasants rose against their oppressors, and formulated their demands in the famous Twelve Articles, the Magna Charta of their times. These so forcibly illustrate their social and economic condition, the fundamental importance of the Land Question, as well as the influence of the new religious teachings on social and political thought, that we are impelled to republish them in full. We would draw special attention to the final article, as well as to the tone and purport of the Introduction. The document, or rather pamphlet, in which they appeared was entitled—

"The Fundamental and Just Chief Articles of all the Peasantry and Villeins by which they Deem Themselves Oppressed."

‡ In his "Six Centuries of Work and Wages," (see diagram, page 144) page 389, Professor Thorold Rogers tells us that "a peasant could provision his family for a twelvemonth with three-quarters of wheat, three of malt, and two of oatmeal, by fifteen weeks of ordinary work; an artisan could achieve the same result in ten weeks." Some forty years later, in 1533, it would have taken him nearly double as long to secure the same food supply; and in 1593 it was not secured as the result of twelve month's ordinary work. In 1651 things were slightly better, and an artisan as the result of 43 weeks work would have secured the same food supply as in 1495 he could have earned in ten weeks. In 1684 matters were worse again; and an artisan and labourer could not during the whole year earn as much as in 1495 they could respectively in ten and in fifteen weeks. To the end of the second quarter of the eighteenth century there is little change. From 1744 to 1761 earnings were slightly higher, the price of provisions being low; but in 1780 things were again worse, money wages remaining stationary, and the price of provisions being considerably higher. There was, he tells us, "some rise in the rate of wages at the conclusion of the century. The poor could not have subsisted had not such a rise been effected; but it bore no proportion to the rise in the necessities of life." In another part of the same great work, p. 355, he reminds his readers that though "the mass of English workmen are far better off now than they were two generations ago, though population has greatly increased; still relatively speaking the working man of to-day is not so well off as he was in the fifteenth century, when the population was not one-tenth of what it is now." We may well join him in his expressed wish, p. 441, "Would that we could unite the opulence of the fifteenth century to the civilisation of the nineteenth, and diffuse or distribute both."

* "Evolution of Religion," p. 237.

† "We will that you free us for ever, us and our lands; and that we be never named or held as serfs"; was the demand of the revolting English peasant in 1381; and this was also practically the demand of the German peasantry in 1525.

INTRODUCTION.

To the Christian Reader, peace and the grace of God through Christ!

There are many anti-Christians who now take occasion to libel the Gospel on account of the assembled peasantry, saying, these be the fruits of the new Gospel, to obey none, to raise rebellion in all places, to rush to arms to reform, to root out, and perhaps to destroy all spiritual and temporal authority. All such godless and wicked judgments the Articles here written do answer; in the first place, so that the shame may be lifted off the Word of God; in the second, to excuse in a Christian manner this uprising of the peasants.

In the first place, the Gospel is no cause of any uprising, seeing that it is the word of Christ, the promised Messiah, whose word and life teach naught save love, peace, patience, and unity; so all who believe in this Christ should be loving, peaceful, patient, and united. The object of all the articles of the peasants, when once clearly apprehended, is that they may hear the Gospel and live according to the Gospel. How then can anti-Christians denounce the Gospel as a cause of rebellion and disobedience? But that anti-Christians and enemies of the Gospel should rise up against such requirements, of this the Gospel is not the cause, but the Devil, the most hateful enemy of the Gospel, who arouses infidelity in his followers, so that the Word of God, which teaches peace and unity, may be trodden down and taken away.

Secondly, the following show clearly that the peasants in their Articles demand the Gospel for teaching and life; therefore they cannot be called disobedient or rebellious. But should God hear the peasants, who sincerely desire to live according to His word: Who will oppose the will of God? (Rom. xi.). Who will impeach His judgment (Isa. xi.). Who dare resist His Majesty? (Rom. viii.). Did He not hear the children of Israel when they called on Him, and delivered them out of the hand of Pharaoh (11 Moses, 3, 7), and can He not to-day also save His own? Aye, He will save them, and that speedily (Luke xviii. 8). Therefore, Christian reader, read the following Articles sedulously, and then judge.

First Article.

It is our humble request and desire, also our will and opinion, that henceforth the community itself shall have the power to choose their pastor, and also to dismiss him if he be found unsuitable. The pastor so chosen shall preach to us the Gospel clearly and purely, free from all man-made additions, teachings, and ordinances. For whoever preaches to us the true Faith giveth us reason to pray to God for his mercy, and to call up within us and confirm us in the true Faith. For if we do not enjoy His grace, we remain mere flesh and blood, which profiteth not. It is clearly written in the Scriptures that it is only through the true Faith that we can come to God, and only through His mercy that we can be saved. Therefore it is that we require such a pastor and minister.

Second Article.

Secondly. As the just tithe was established in the Old Testament, and in the New covered all dues, so we will gladly furnish the just tithe of corn, but only in a seemly manner, according to which it should be given to God and divided amongst His servants. It is the due of a pastor, as the Word of God clearly proclaims. Therefore it is our will that our church-overscers, such as are appointed by the community, shall collect and receive this tithe, and therefrom shall give to the pastor, who shall be chosen by the community, suitable and sufficient subsistence for him and his, as the whole community may deem just. The surplus shall be devoted to the use of the poor and needy, as we are instructed in the Holy Scriptures. And that no general tax shall be levied upon the poor, their share of such taxation shall be defrayed out of such surplus.

In the villages where the right to the tithe has been sold, out of sheer necessity, the buyers shall lose nothing, but their rights shall be redeemed in a seemly manner. But those who have not bought the right to the tithe from the village, but who or whose fathers have simply usurped it for themselves, we will not and we should not give them anything. We owe such men nothing; but we are willing out of the proceeds of such tithes to support our chosen pastor, and to relieve the needy as we are commanded in the Holy Scriptures.

The small tithe we will not give. For God the Lord hath created the beasts free to mankind (Gen. i.). It is only a mere human invention that we should pay tithes on them. Therefore we shall not pay such tithes in the future.

Third Article.

Thirdly. It has hitherto been the custom that we should be held as serfs, which is deplorable, since Christ redeemed us all with His precious blood, the shepherd as well as the noble, the lowest as well as the highest, none excepted. Therefore it accords with Scripture that we should be free; and we will be free. Not that we are absolutely free, or desire to be free from all authority; this God does not teach us. We are to live according to His commandments, not according to the promptings of the flesh; but shall love God as our Master, and recognise Him as the one nearest to us. And everything He has commanded, we shall do; and His commands do not instruct us to disobey the orders of the authorities. On the contrary, not only before the authorities, but before all men are we to be humble; so that in all matters, fitting and Christian, we shall gladly obey the orders of those who have been chosen or have been set up over us. And, doubtless, as true and honest Christians you will gladly abolish serfdom, or prove it to be in accordance with the Gospel.

Fourth Article.

Fourthly. It has hitherto been the custom that no poor man should have any right to the game, the birds, or to the fish in the running waters. This seems to us unseemly and unbrotherly, and not to be in accordance with the Word of God. Moreover, in some places the authorities let the game increase to our injury and mighty undoing, since we have to permit that which God hath caused to grow for the use of man to be unavailingly devoured by the beasts; and we have to hold our peace concerning this, which is against God and our neighbours. When our Lord God created mankind, He gave him power over all creatures, over the birds in the air and the fish in the waters. Therefore as regards those who control the running waters and who can show us documents to prove that they purchased it with money, we do not desire to take it away from such men by force, but to come to some Christian agreement with them in brotherly love. Those who have no such documents should share with the community in a seemly manner.

Fifth Article.

Fifthly. We find ourselves oppressed as regards the woods. For our lords have taken unto themselves all the woods; and when the poor man requires any wood, he has to buy it with money. Our view is that such woods, whether claimed by spiritual or temporal lords, as have not been purchased should return again to the community, and be free to all in a seemly manner. So that those who require wood for firing shall be free to take same without payment, as also if he require any for carpentering, but, of course, always with the knowledge of the chosen authorities of the community. But where there are no woods save those which have been honestly purchased, with such we will arrange the matter in a brotherly and Christian spirit. And in cases where the land was first appropriated and afterwards sold, we will also come to an agreement with the buyers according to the circumstances of the case, and with regard to brotherly love and the Holy Writings.

Sixth Article.

Sixthly. The burden of service presses heavily upon us, and is daily increased. We desire that this matter shall be looked into, and that we be not so heavily burdened, but shall be mercifully dealt with herein; that we should serve but as our fathers have served, but only according to the Word of God.

Seventh Article.

Seventhly. Henceforth we will no longer allow ourselves to be oppressed by a lord; but according as the lord hath granted the land, so shall it be held, according to the agreement between the lord and the peasant. The lord shall not force him to render more service for naught; so that the peasant shall enjoy his holding in peace and unoppressed. But if the lord hath need of service, the peasant shall be willing and obedient to him before others; but it shall be at the hour and the time when it shall not injure the peasant, and at a proper remuneration.

Eighth Article.

Eighthly. Many of us are oppressed in that we hold lands that will not bear the price placed on them, so that the peasant thereby is ruined and undone. Our desire is that the lord should allow such land to be seen by honourable men, so that the price may be fixed in such a manner that the peasant shall not have his labour in vain: for every labourer is worthy of his hire (Matt. x.).

Ninth Article.

Ninthly. We suffer greatly because of the new punishments that are continually laid upon us. Not that they punish us according to the circumstances of the case; but at times spitefully, and at times favourably. We would be punished according to the old written punishments, and not arbitrarily.

Tenth Article.

Tenthly. We suffer in that some have taken to themselves meadows and arable land that belong to the community. Such land we would take once more into the hands of our communities, wheresoever they have not been honestly purchased. But where they have been purchased, then shall the case be agreed upon in peace and brotherly love, according to the circumstances of the case.

Eleventh Article.

Eleventhly. We would have the custom called the death-due entirely abolished. We will never suffer nor permit that widows and orphans shall be disgraced and robbed of their own, contrary to God and honour, as has happened in many cases and in many ways. Those who would protect and shelter them, they have abused and injured, and when these have had some little property, even this have they taken. Such things God will no longer suffer, they shall be abolished. For such things no man shall henceforth be compelled to give aught, be it little or much.

Twelfth Article.

Twelfthly. It is our resolve and final decision that if any of the Articles here set forth be not according to the Word of God, we will, wherever they are shown to be against the Word of God, at once withdraw therefrom. Yea, even though certain Articles were now granted us and it should hereafter be found that they are unjust, from that hour they shall be null and void and of no effect. The same shall happen is there should with truth be found in the Scriptures yet more Articles

which were held to be against God and a stumbling block to our neighbours, even though we should have determined to preserve such for ourselves. For we have determined and resolved to practice ourselves in all Christian doctrines. Therefore we pray God the Lord who can grant us the same, and none other. The peace of Christ be with you all. AMEN.

* * *

That the demands of the peasants as thus formulated were reasonable, just, and moderate, few to-day would care to deny. That once secured they would have advanced the civilisation of Germany, and, through Germany, of the whole world, seems to us equally self evident. But it was not to be. In defence of their privileges the German princes, spiritual and temporal, catholic and evangelical, united their forces; the uprising was put down in a sea of blood; and the yoke of serfdom firmly fixed upon the necks of the people, to be abolished, at least nominally, three hundred years later (1807) when the Napoleonic invasion compelled the ruling classes to relinquish some of their most cherished privileges. To social reformers, however, the accounts of such uprisings are instructive; for they were obviously of the products of the unparalleled intellectual movement of the times; this movement still continues, and its full fruits, social, political, and moral, have yet to be harvested by mankind.

L. H. B.

THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM.

THE FIRST QUESTION.

A REPLY TO THE LIBERAL LEADER.

SIR HENRY CAMPBELL-BANNERMAN spent Christmas Eve in addressing his constituents at Inverkeithing. With his general attitude of hostility to the powers that be we have little present concern. This is not a season at which the struggle of parties appeals to us; but we are glad to observe that the Liberal leader has one note to strike which does not involve a party issue necessarily. He comes now as a declared advocate of land value taxation, and, as far as he is able, pledges his followers to a policy which aims at forcing holders of land to contribute to the common fund some portion of the increased wealth which the enterprise and development of the country make possible. Sir Henry, however, thinks the question the most essential one before the country next to temperance.

We take another view, and place it before all the other questions in rank of importance; for it has always seemed to us that intemperance in a great measure arises from the root-evil of bad housing. To elaborate great schemes of service reform or of educational reform is little better than useless so long as the masses of our people live in surroundings and under conditions that are inimical to the health of mind or body. It is idle to talk of an Imperial race bred in the slums. The glamour of a great and world-wide empire appeals to our senses, but there is always the question of how it shall be kept and ordered. It is singular that in spite of our bad breeding grounds the average citizen has lost so little of the old morale, the old patience, and the old courage. Our physical deterioration is much more distinctly marked. The experience of the South African campaign—as Lord Charles Beresford points out in a correspondence which we publish to-day—should have taught us that our eyesight has lost its keenness, and that our physical endurance is not as great as it was a century since.

Ophthalmia is one of the slum diseases, and it must increase in virulence and frequency as long as our slum system prevails.

A nation that neglects its health will not for long compete as a conquering people, or endure in the world's race. It must always be a question of the survival of the fittest, and it is being borne in upon us that without searching and drastic reform of our housing arrangements we shall not be the fittest. Believing this, we welcome the advent of every earnest worker in this all-important movement. While we know that things are worse than they need be under existing laws, we are, nevertheless, well aware that a complete cure depends upon the fullest reform of our land system. Palliatives are already to our hands, but the eradication of the evil must be the result of an absolute removal of the cause. Sir Henry argues that the difficulty of obtaining land is the great deterrent in the way of municipal housing upon a liberal and efficient basis. "In many large towns they found the owners of the soil reserve it from occupation or for building purposes in order to secure the higher value which would ultimately come to their land by the industry and enterprise of the community." This is not only true of many large towns but of all large towns. Overcrowding and its attendant evils are absolutely necessary from a landlord's point of view. The essential idea beneath the "Taxation of Land Values" is that by making him pay for land which he 'saves up,' he will be given a healthy inducement to part with it for present profit rather than speculate on futures at the expense of the community.

Apart from the impetus which such a tax would give to housing reform, there is also the great question of equalising the burdens of taxation from which the landed interest is practically free.

The statutory land tax does not realise a tithe of what it should if it were honestly administered. Nor is it fair in principle, for it penalises one landlord and excuses another. A tax upon land values would fall most heavily upon the holders of urban sites, and as these values are chiefly those which are due to "unearned increment" they are obviously the best adapted for taxation. Such a tax would relieve a Chancellor of the unpleasant duty of taxing our food supplies or of harrying our industries with vexatious and debilitating imposts. The national revenues might easily be guaranteed by such a tax without inflicting any considerable hardship upon the land owning classes. We think more of the Liberal leader's utterances upon this question because hitherto neither his attitude nor that of his following has been very pronounced. If he places this question as second in importance now it should not take long to convince him that the national well-being, and, indeed, the national life, so far depends upon it that it should stand easily first in our minds and take the most prominent place in our interest in the future.—*Manchester Daily Despatch*, December 25th, 1902 (100,000 copies daily).

Let human transactions be free, and I assert that they are not and cannot be anything else than a reciprocal exchange of services.—*Eastat*.

Right, and not might, is the foundation of Democratic Ethics; and the test of what is right is the rule—Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.—*Government by the People*.

I do not say that there is no other class that abuses its power—but I do say: No reform, no beneficial change can last, no real good can be effected, so long as an hereditary land caste is allowed to exist as such.—*Ernest Jones*.