

THE SINGLE TAX REVIEW

A Record of the Progress of Single Tax and Tax Reform
Throughout the World.

TWO REMARKABLE NOVELS.

(*For the Review.*)

By LEWIS H. BEHRENS.

"I care not who makes the people's laws, provided I be allowed to write the people's ballads," was the suggestive remark of a celebrated democratic poet of the eighteenth century. To-day in most English-speaking countries the ballad writer has almost entirely passed away, and his place has been taken by the writers of fiction. It is from novels, from avowed works of fiction, even more than from newspapers, that the proverbial man in the street, and still more his woman-kind, gains such ideas as they have of the ideals and aspirations which to-day are influencing the thought of the world, and determining its future destinies. The fiction that most strongly appeal to them may not be of the highest order, for their natural tendency is toward sensationalism rather than toward philosophy. The works of George Eliot, to my mind the most philosophic writer of fiction modern times has produced, will be distasteful to many who will eagerly devour the works of a Marie Corelli. And many whom the best works of a Thackeray, or even of a Dickens, will but tire, will turn with avidity to the works of a Dumas, a Max Pemberton, a Jules Verne, and others of the adventurous and romantic school. Hence it is that we always rejoice when we find any such works inspired, or even influenced, by a sound, healthy, and illuminating social philosophy, more especially if it be by the elevating social philosophy so honorably associated with the name of Henry George. And it is to two novels manifestly influenced, if not inspired, by these doctrines that we purpose drawing the attention of our readers in this paper. Both are from the pen of the same author, M. P. Shiel, and both appeared in the same year, 1901, though issued by different publishers.

"THE LORD OF THE SEA."

This is the title of the one which first attracted our notice; and though we must confess to have found it most unequal, and susceptible of much improvement by revision and condensation, yet we found it imbued throughout with a sound knowledge and deep insight into the fundamental principles of the Georgian philosophy, which to-day is slowly but surely gaining a foothold in every civilized country throughout the world. Its romantic story may be briefly outlined as follows: The hero is condemned to be hanged, afterwards commuted to penal servitude for life, for a crime of which, of course, he is

"THE LORD OF THE SEA," by M. P. Shiel. Published by Grant Richards, London, 1901, (Price 6/). "THE PURPLE CLOUD," by the same author. Published by Chatto and Windus, London, 1901, (Price 6/).

innocent. In the solitude of his cell he finds the solution of the social problem which had always troubled his understanding; he escapes in order to proclaim it to the world, only to find that it has been already preached and scornfully rejected, not only by those who profit, or think they profit, by the prevailing social injustice, but also by the downtrodden, impoverished and degraded victims thereof. He then feels that the world is not to be converted to social justice by persuasion and argument, but by force, and suddenly finding himself in possession of untold millions, he determines to devote them to its conversion. He claims the sea as his domain, erects floating forts and takes possession of his property, demands tribute or rent from the commerce of the world, destroys the navies sent against him, then saves Great Britain from invasion, brings the nations of the world to his feet, and agrees to cease to demand tribute, by which is meant *rent*, from those who use or trespass on his domain, *provided* that in all countries the equal claim of all to the use of the earth shall be recognized and respected, and an equal share of the natural bounties shall be secured to all.

The following extracts will sufficiently indicate the telling manner in which the gospel of radical Land Reform is preached in the romantic and sometimes bewildering pages of this remarkable book :

THE PROBLEM SUGGESTED.

In the opening pages the problem urgently requiring solution is indicated in a speech, placed, of course, in the mouth of the hero as follows:

"I tell you the vast earth laughs, literally laughs, at the insignificant drawings made upon her resources by the puny infantry called Man: and still, if the population of the earth were multiplied by trillions and quadrillions, she would laugh, showering even more upon us her careless largesses, the more of us there were.... Then why do we suffer, friends? What is the fault? The world is full of want, wide daily slaughter, mortal woe... But God has given us a most plenteous earth, and such a thing as want can only appear on it by some miracle of chronic blindness. I see, therefore, that there is a fault—we all see that; and I know this about the fault, that it is something very old, simple, commonplace, yet deep, deep, or we should all see it at once; but it is hidden from our observation by its very ordinariness, like the sun which we seldom look at. It *must* be so. But as to what the fault is I have no suspicion: I have never had time to think."

THE PROBLEM SOLVED.

"Never had time to think!" suggestive words, truly. In the solitude of his cell, however, he has time, more time than enough. A chance remark of a passing fisherman gives him the clue, and in the most striking pages of the whole book, in pages which contain the kernel as well as the crisis of the whole story, a master pen reveals to us how simple the solution really is, when once the clue to it is placed in our hands.

"What was it the old man had said about fish, and fishermen, and the sea? Hogarth remembered that it had struck him at the time—for a moment only. Here and now certainly he had time to think of it. He bent his brow to it, sought out, and finally remembered something like the very words: 'The day's work of a fisherman gives him enough fish to live on all the week, and he could lie around idling the other six days if he chose; only people can't live on nothing but fish all the time, you know.'

Was it true? He thought that it must be true if an old fisherman said it... But if the words were true, it was strange—strange. Was the sea, then, a more productive element for men to work in than the land? That was absurd: the land, in the nature of things, was very far more productive than the sea. Then why could not all men procure an easy superfluity by one day's work, idling six, as the fisher could, if he chose to live naked in a cave eating fish alone! In that case the fisher could change some of his day's work fish for the shore people day's work things, and so all have variety as well as superabundance.

At the interest of this question he leapt from his hammock, peering into that thing... This, then, was clear; that there was some big difference between land and sea as working ground for men.... There was, therefore, some power which took from shore-people a very large part of what they made: a power which did not exist on the sea. That much was certain. What was this power? this vast inherent difference?

He could think of no vast inherent difference between sea and land, except this: that all who worked on shore paid rent for land in many forms, directly and indirectly, in a million, million secret, subtle ways: but those who fished on sea paid none for the sea. So, then, if shore-folk paid no rent for the shore, they would have a still greater superfluity of shoes, etc., from one day's labor in six than the fish-rich fisher on the sea.

So it seemed. So it *was*—as with savages. He started: but one half minute's reflection showed him that it was in the very nature of the shore to pay rent: because one piece of land, for various reasons, was better than another—City land for instance—and those working on the better must pay for that benefit. Civilized land, therefore, was bound to pay rent.... The wretchedness of man, then, was a Law, fixed, fixed. Hogarth was faced by a wall. He felt himself on the verge of some high truth, fundamental as the hills: yet he was baffled. Of course, he was quite an unlearned fellow; but he imagined himself a pioneer that night, grappling with a secret into which no brain had ever penetrated—such was his high-born self-sufficiency: nor had any idea that the problem had long been solved by the clearest spirits that have walked the earth.

Land was bound to pay rent: he reached that point; and there for an hour of toil remained.

But suppose the workers on shore paid all the rent *among themselves*?

At last these words, in a great moment, crossed his lips: and he uttered a shout that echoed through the galleries of Colmoor..... He leapt and paced.

If the workers on shore paid all the rent among one another:—then they would, on the whole, be in precisely the same position as the fish-rich workers on sea, who paid no rent at all! the nation, as a whole, would live on its country rent free: England would be English, as the sea human: and our race might then begin to live!"

THE CONVICTION OF THE TRUE SINGLE-TAXER.

And on the next page find the following suggestive and inspiring passage, in which the inmost conviction of all true Single Taxers is admirably and beautifully summarized.

"To a man who finds Truth, there is no uncertainty as to Her lineaments: deep well he knows Her look, Her smile: there can be no mistake. Though a heavenly host should appear, with a shout, to gainsay him, still, calm as Galileo, he would reply: 'You have somehow miscarried: the fact is so: God knows it.'"

THE CLAIM TO THE SEA.

The letter which the hero subsequently addresses to the Foreign Offices of Europe, and in which he sets forth his claim to the sovereignty of the sea, is also worthy of quotation. It runs as follows:

"I have the honour hereby to make formal announcement to Your Lordship that I am on the point of setting up, in the midst of the world, a new Power, the most extended which has hitherto been, but one whose relations with the Queen's Government will, I trust, be those of friendliness..... The domain of my Power will be the sea: and to the sea I set up claim as far as such points of latitude as have been attained by Man, and over all the degrees of longitude..... The validity of my Title to the sea must be considered to rest on the same basis as the title of any private owner to any particular area of the earth's crust namely Priority of Claim. If the one is valid, so, necessarily, is the other; if one is invalid, so, I admit, is the other. But this title to land, based on *Priority of Claim*, is admitted in the Law of all civilized nations, and, outside the Law-courts is hardly disputed. Wherefore can my claim to sea be hardly disputed: for, till now, no person, no nation, has laid claim to it, in the way of private, or national, property, as I hereby do.... This my claim, therefore, is in harmony with the spirit of (for example) British Law in its actual form. And whether it should be recognized I say not; but I say that it will be recognized: for it will be enforced."

I think we have now sufficiently indicated the spirit and character of this very remarkable book, a revised and condensed edition of which would, I think, sell well on your side of the water, and do much useful and timely work in stirring up thought on that question of questions, the Land Question.

"THE PURPLE CLOUD."

Weird, repellent and fantastic, yet intensely realistic, attractive and fascinating, is this other book of Mr. Shiel, which we should not advise anyone to read late at night after everybody else has gone to bed. The hero returns from

a trip to the North Pole and finds that a purple cloud of hydrocyanic acid had suddenly destroyed the rest of mankind. For many years he roams and ravages over the whole world, seeking to eradicate every sign of man's activities: and upward of two-thirds of the book, which is a veritable *tour de force*, is taken up with vivid and nightmare breeding descriptions of his thoughts, feelings, emotions and actions under these very blood-curdling conditions. After many years he discovers that another human being has been miraculously saved, a young girl, as pure and sweet and innocent as Mother Eve before the Fall. His experiences have convinced him that the whole race of mankind were necessarily and naturally wicked and depraved; her intuitions have convinced her that they were naturally good, and that if they really became bad it was simply the conditions under which they lived that made them so. The following conversation will suffice to reveal the author's keen insight into psychological and social problems:

"Vices and crimes, crimes and vices. Always the same. What were these crimes and vices?"

"Robberies of a hundred sorts, murders of ten hundred."

"But that made them *do* them?"

"Their evil nature—their base souls."

"But *you* are one of them, *I* am another: yet you and I live here together, and we do no vices and crimes."

"No," I said, "we do no vices and crimes because we lack *motive*. There is no danger that we should hate each other, for we have plenty to eat and drink, dates, wines and thousands of things. But *they* hated and schemed, because they were very numerous, and there arose a question among them of dates and wine."

"Was there not, then, enough land to grow dates and wine for all?"

"There was—yes: much more than enough, I fancy. But some got hold of a vast lot of it, and as the rest felt the pinch of scarcity, there arose, naturally, a pretty state of things—including vices and crimes."

"Ah, but then," says she, "it was not to their bad souls that the vices and crimes were due, but only to this question of land. It is certain that had there been no such question, there would have been no vices and crimes, because you and I, who are just like them, do no vices and crimes here, where there is no such question."

"I am not going to argue the matter," I said. "There *was* that question of dates and wine, you see. And there always must be on an earth where millions of men, with varying degrees of cunning reside."

"Oh, not at all necessarily!" she cries, with conviction; "not at all, at all: since there are much more dates and wine than are enough for all. If there should spring up more men now, having the whole wisdom, science, and experience of the past at their hand, and they made an arrangement among themselves that the first man who tried to take more than he could work should be killed, the question could never arise again."

"It arose before—it would arise again."

"But No! I can guess clearly how it arose before: it arose through the sheer carelessness of the first men. The land was at first so very, very much more than enough for all, that the men did not take the trouble to make an arrangement among themselves; and afterwards the habit of carelessness was confirmed; till at last the very original carelessness must have got to have the look of an arrangement; and so the stream that began in a little wrong ended in a big wrong, the wrong growing more and more fixed and fatal as the stream rolled further from its source. I see it clearly, can't you? But now, if some more men would spring, they would be taught—"

"Ah, but no more men will spring, you see—"

"There is no telling. I sometimes feel as if they must, and shall. The trees blossom, the thunder rolls, the air makes me run and leap, the ground is full of richness, and I hear the voice of the Lord God walking all among the trees of the forests."

I have glanced at several of Mr. Shiel's later works, but have found in them no reference to social questions. In conclusion, however, I would express the hope that in the fullness of time, if leisure and opportunity are granted him, he will yet produce another book in which the gospel of social salvation will be preached, and the cry of "Land for the People" will be raised, in a manner which will bring it home to ever increasing thousands of his fellow-creatures. Those of our readers who have perused the above quotations will agree with me in believing that Mr. Shiel has within him the power to produce such a book.

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