

## CHAPTER IV.

## CAN ENGLAND FEED HERSELF?

This our earth this day produces sufficient for our existence, this our earth produces not only a sufficiency, but a superabundance, and pours a cornucopia of good things down upon us. Further, it produces sufficient for stores and granaries to be filled to the roof-tree for years ahead. I verily believe that the earth in one year produces enough food to last for thirty. Why, then have we not enough? Why do people die of starvation, or lead a miserable existence on the verge of it? Why have millions upon millions to toil from morning to evening just to gain a mere crust of bread? Because of the absolute lack of organisation by which such labour should produce its effect, the absolute lack of distribution, the absolute lack, even, of the very idea that such things are possible. Nay, even to mention such things, to say that they are possible, is criminal with many. Madness could hardly go farther.—*Richard Jefferies.*

If England were swallowed up by the sea to-morrow, which of the two, a hundred years hence, would most excite the love, interest, and admiration of mankind—would most, therefore, show the evidences of having possessed greatness—the England of the last twenty years, or the England of Elizabeth, of a time of splendid spiritual effort, but when our coal, and our industrial operations depending on coal, were very little developed?—*Matthew Arnold.*

The absurdity of the attempt as yet to measure the power of subsistence and to declare it to be limited can be demonstrated in two or three simple ways suitable to the use of a statistician like myself. First, no man yet knows the productive capacity of a single acre of land anywhere in respect to food; second, the whole existing population of the globe, estimated at 1,400,000,000 persons, could find comfortable standing room within the limits of a field ten miles square. The land capable of producing wheat is not occupied to anything like one-twentieth of its extent. We can raise grain enough on a small part of the territory of the United States to feed the world.—*Ed. Atkinson.*

We come now to the third objection to the factory system—that it is unnecessary. It is often asserted that this country could not feed all her present population. I will try to show you that this is absurd. But first of all let me recommend to you Sketchley's "Review of European Society," price 1s. 6d. (William Reeves, London); and "Poverty and the State," by Herbert V. Mills (Kegan Paul, Trench, & Co.).

We have to prove that the British Islands can grow wheat enough to feed 36 millions of people.

In Hoyle's "Sources of Wealth" it is stated that Great Britain and Ireland contain about 50 millions of acres of good land, unbuilt upon and available for agriculture.

Lord Lauderdale estimates that 500 acres will feed 2,000 people, that is four to the acre. Therefore if we used *all* our available land we could feed 200 millions of people.

Take a lower estimate. Allison estimates, in his "Principles of Population," that, after allowing for bad land and pasture land, these islands could feed the following numbers:—

England and Wales.....	60,000,000
Scotland.....	15,000,000
Ireland .....	48,000,000
Total.....	<u>123,000,000</u>

But these are estimates. Take accomplished facts. The *Quarterly Review* said in 1873 that in the year 1841 England grew wheat at home for 24 millions of people.

Now read this quotation, from a speech of Mr. Cobden's at Manchester:—

I have heard Mr. Oglivey say—and he is willing to go before a committee of the House to prove it—that Cheshire, if properly cultivated, is capable of producing three times as much as it now produces from its surface . . . and there is not a higher authority in the kingdom.

That was in 1844, at a time when England grew wheat for 24,000,000 of its people.

The Manchester School would have us believe that we cannot feed 36 millions. Well, in 1885 we imported nearly £53,000,000 worth of foreign wheat.

Compare that sum with the following statement by Mr. Mechi:—

I have tested this by comparative results, and find that if all the land in this kingdom equal to my own, about 50 million acres, produced as much per acre as mine does, our agricultural produce would be increased by the enormous amount of £421,000,000 annually.

So much for the possible yield of our land under ordinary cultivation.

But now comes the most tremendous idea—the idea of what is called "intensive agriculture."

In an article in the *Forum* in 1890, Prince Krapotkin says that when we learn how to use the soil we may feed ten times our population with ease. This, he says, has been proved in France. Note this:—

That, by combining a series of such simple operations as the selections of seeds, sowing in rows, and proper manuring, the crops can be increased by at least 75 per cent. over the best present average, while the cost of production can be reduced by 50 per cent. by the use of some inexpensive machinery, to say nothing of costly machines, like the steam digger, or the pulverisers which make the soil required for each special culture.

The Prince is right. Agriculture has been neglected because all the mechanical and chemical skill, and all the capital and energy of man, have been thrown into the struggle for trade profits and manufacturing pre-eminence. We want a few Faradays, Watts, Stephensons, and Cobdens to devote their genius and industry to the great food question. Once let the public interest and the public genius be concentrated upon the agriculture of England, and we shall soon get silenced the croakers who talk about the impossibility of the country feeding her people.

But, again, Prince Krapotkin says:—

Mr. Hallett, by a simple selection of grains, will obtain in a few years a wheat which bears 10,840 grains on each stem grown from a single seed; so that from seven to eight hundred of his stems of wheat (which could be grown upon a score of square yards) would give the yearly supply of bread for a full-grown person.

Twenty square yards to feed one person. Then one acre would feed 242 persons; so that to find bread for our entire population of 36 millions we need only 148,763 acres.

When I add that Devonshire contains 1,665,208 acres, that Surrey contains 485,129 acres, and Kent 995,392 acres, I think you will see that we need not depend upon America for our wheat.

Nor is that all. The *Review of Reviews*, in its notice on this valuable paper of Prince Krapotkin's, says:—

Prince Krapotkin's chief illustrations, however, as to the possibility of intensive agriculture are taken from the Channel Islands, and notably from Guernsey. Guernsey has 1,300 persons to the square mile, and has more unproductive soil than Jersey; but Guernsey leads the world in the matter of advanced agriculture, because Guernsey is being practically roofed in. The Guernsey kitchen garden is all under glass. Prince Krapotkin found in one place three-fourths of an acre covered with glass; in another, in Jersey, he found vineries under glass covering thirteen acres, and yielding more money return than that which

can be taken from an ordinary English farm of 1,300 acres. Each acre of greenhouse employs three men. The cost of erecting them is about ten shillings per square yard, excluding the cost of the heating pipes. The thirteen acres are warmed by consuming a thousand cart loads of coke and coal. Prince Krapotkin sees that before long immense vineries will grow up round the coal pits of Northumberland, where artificial heat can be obtained from coals selling at the cost of three shillings the ton.

Depend upon it, what I have told you is true, and that England can feed her people as she has fed them in times gone by, with never a factory flue to vomit foulness into the air, and never a greedy money-grasper to poison her streams with filth, or wither her woods and glades with soot and sulphur.

We will next proceed to consider my fourth objection to the factory system, when I think I shall be able to show you, beyond all question, that besides being hideous, unpleasant, unhealthy, and unnecessary, the factories are a serious danger to the existence of the Empire.

Granting that the factory system is an evil, is it a necessary evil?

Why do we weave cloth and cotton? For two purposes:—

1. To clothe ourselves.
2. To exchange for foreign produce.

To provide for our own needs we must make cotton or linen fabrics. True. But we need not make them by steam power. We could make them by water power, and so abolish the smoke nuisance.

Will you have the goodness, Mr. Smith, to cast your eyes over the following statements, made, a few years ago, by Prof. Thompson:—

The average rise and fall of the tide at the city of Bristol, five miles from its mouth, is 23 feet. According to calculations I have made from the average volume of water displaced up and down each tide, there are no fewer than 20 billions foot-pounds of energy wasted each year, or enough to charge 10 million Faure cells. At the mouth of the river the total annual energy thus running to utter waste cannot be less than 50 billions foot-pounds, and in the rapid currents of the river Severn, with their enormous tides of great volume, the tidal energy must be practically unlimited. A tenth part of the tidal energy in the gorge of the Avon would light the city of Bristol; a tenth part of the

tidal energy in the channel of the Severn would light every city; and another tenth part would turn every loom and spindle and axle in Great Britain.

The power of water is tremendous; the beauty of water is sublime. Perhaps, when our practical men learn a little common sense, we shall be able to grind an axe or throw a shuttle without blackening the sky above or choking the unhappy creatures who crawl upon the earth beneath. Besides, the less coal needed, the fewer colliers needed, and in the *Clarion* Tito has told us that ninety thousand men and boys are killed and injured every year in the mines.

Now, Mr. Smith, why should we make cotton goods for foreign countries?

The Manchester School will tell you that we must do it to buy corn. In 1885 we exported cotton goods to the value of £66,000,000; and we imported corn and flour, in the same year, to the value of £53,000,000.

Why? The Manchester School will tell you that we cannot grow our own corn. That is not true.

They will tell you that as foreigners can grow corn more cheaply than we can, and as we can make cotton goods more cheaply than they can, it is to the interest of both parties to exchange.

I do not believe that any nation can sell corn more cheaply than we *could* produce it; and I am sure that even if it cost a little more to grow our corn than to buy it, yet it would be to our interest to grow it. First as to the cost of growing corn. In the *Industrial History of England* I find the question of why the English farmer is undersold answered in this way:—

The answer is simple. His capital has been filched from him, surely, but not always slowly, by a tremendous increase in his rent. The landlords of the eighteenth century made the English farmer the foremost agriculturist in the world, but their successors of the nineteenth have ruined him by their extortions. . . . .  
 In 1799 we find land paying nearly 20s. an acre. . . . . By 1850 it had risen to 38s. 6d. . . . £2 an acre was not an uncommon rent for land a few years ago, the average increase of English rent being no less than 26½ per cent. between 1854 and 1879. . . . . The result has been that the average capital per acre now employed in agriculture is only about £4 or £5 instead of at least £10, as it ought to be.



I know it has been said, and is said, that an English farmer owning his land cannot compete with foreign dealers; but I think that is doubtful, and I am sure that if the land were owned by the State, and farmed systematically by the best methods, we might grow our corn more cheaply than we could buy it.

But suppose we could not. The logical result of the free-trade argument would be that British agriculture must perish. The case was very clearly put by Mr. Cobden in the House of Commons:—

To buy in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest, what is the meaning of the maxim? It means that you take the article which you have in the greatest abundance, and with it obtain from others that of which they have the most to spare; so giving to mankind the means of enjoying the fullest abundance of earth's goods.

Yes, it means that, but it means much more than that. However, let us reduce these fine phrases to figures. Suppose America can sell us wheat at 30s. a quarter, and suppose ours costs 32s. 6d. a quarter. That is a gain of  $\frac{1}{15}$  in the cost of wheat. *We get a loaf for 3d. instead of having to pay 3 $\frac{1}{4}$ d. That is all the fine phrases mean.*

What do we lose? We lose the beauty and health of our factory towns; we lose annually some twenty thousand lives in Lancashire alone; we are in constant danger of great strikes, like that which recently so crushed our cotton-operatives; we are reduced to the meanest shifts and the most violent acts of piracy and slaughter to "open up markets" for our goods; we lose the stamina of our people; and—*we lose our agriculture.*

Did you ever consider what it involves, this ruin of British agriculture? Do you know how rapidly the ruin is being wrought? Here is a list, from the *Quarterly Review*, of 1873, of the relative proportions of home-grown and foreign-grown wheat used in this country:—

	Population dependent on home-grown wheat.	Population dependent on foreign wheat.
1821 .....	18,800,000 .....	600,000
1831 .....	21,850,000 .....	700,000
1841 .....	24,280,000 .....	1,200,000
1851 .....	23,550,000 .....	3,930,000
1861 .....	21,500,000 .....	6,706,000
1871 .....	19,278,000 .....	11,661,000

And to this Mr. Sketchley adds his estimate for 1880, which is:—

	Home-grown wheat.	Foreign wheat.
1880 .....	12,152,000 .....	22,352,000

Now, suppose we get at last to a state of things under which thirty-six millions live on foreign-grown wheat and none on wheat of home growth! Suppose our agriculture is dead; and we depend entirely upon foreigners for our daily bread! What will be our position then?

Our position will be this. We shall be unable to produce our own food, and can only get it by selling to foreign countries our manufactured goods. We must buy wheat from America with cotton goods; but first of all we must buy raw cotton with which to make those goods.

We are therefore entirely dependent upon foreigners for our *existence*.

Very well. Suppose we go to war with America! What happens? Do you remember the cotton famine? That was bad; but a mere trifle to what an Anglo-American war would be. We should, in fact, be beaten without firing a shot. America need only close her ports to corn and cotton and we should be starved into surrender, and acceptance of her terms.

Or suppose a European war; say with France, or Russia. *All* our goods and *all* our food have to be brought over sea. What would it cost us to keep command of the seas? What would the effect of the panic be here? And suppose we found our communications cut. We should be starved into surrender at once.

Or suppose France at war with America. Our sufferings would be something terrible.

Tory orators and Jingo poets are fond of shouting the glories of the Empire and the safety of our possessions; and reams of paper have been covered with patriotic songs about our "silver streak" and our "tight little island." But don't you see, Mr. Smith, that if we lose our power to feed ourselves *we destroy the advantages of our insular position?* Don't you see that if we destroy our agriculture we destroy our independence at a blow, and become a defenceless nation?

Don't you see that the people who depend on foreigners for their food are at the mercy of any ambitious statesman who chooses to make war upon them? And don't you think that is a rather stiff price to pay to get a farthing off the loaf?

Well, Mr. Smith, thanks to the Manchester School, to the factory system, and to the grasping landlord—who is generally a Tory and fond of bargaining about the security of the Empire—we are almost helpless *now*. Another twenty years of prosperous trade and cheap bread, and we are done for.

Again, how shall we look if, after we have killed our agriculture, we lose our trade? Do you think that impossible? Your cotton-lords seem to think it possible enough, and are now telling you that the only means of keeping the trade which is to kill your agriculture and destroy your national independence is to *lower your wages*.

That farthing off the loaf is going to cost you dear, John Smith, before you have done with it.

Your trade union leaders tell you that you have beaten all foreign competition *except that of India*.

Do you think that you can fight India, John? I don't. Because in India labour is so cheap, and because your cotton-lords, John, some of whom are Liberals, and friends of the people, John, and others of whom are Tories, who would die for the safety of the Empire, John, will take precious good care to use that cheap Indian labour to bring down your wages, John, by means of competition. Oh, John, John, you silly fellow, have you no eyes?

These are some of the reasons why I don't love the factory system. Consider them; and read the history of that system, and how its first successes were bought by the murder and torture of little children, and spent in buying the freedom of West Indian slaves and in waging war against the French Republic.

The thing is evil. It is evil in its origin, in its progress, in its methods, in its motives, and in its effects. No nation can be sound whose motive power is greed. No nation can be secure unless it is independent, no nation can be independent unless it is based upon agriculture.



Will you consider this passage from "Field and Hedge-row," by Richard Jefferies, a beautiful book, and well worth buying:—

Of the broad surface of the golden wheat and its glory I have already spoken, yet these flower-encircled acres, these beautiful fields of peaceful wheat, are the battle-fields of life. . . . The wheat-fields are the battle-fields of the world. If not so openly invaded as of old time, the struggle between nations is still one for the ownership or for the control of corn. When Italy became a vineyard and could no more feed armies, slowly power slipped away, and the great empire of Rome split into many pieces. It has long been foreseen that if ever England is occupied with a great war, the question of our corn supply, so largely derived from abroad, will become a weighty matter. . . .

As persons, each of us, in our voluntary and involuntary struggle for money, is really striving for those little grains of wheat that lie so lightly in the palm of the hand. Corn is coin, and coin is corn, and whether it be a labourer in the field, who no sooner receives his weekly wage than he exchanges it for bread, or whether it be the financier in Lombard Street who loans millions, the object is really the same—wheat.

All ends in the same: iron mines, coal mines, factories, furnaces, the counter, the desk—no one can live on iron, or coal, or cotton—the object is really sacks of wheat.

Now, John, is that good sense? Is it nothing to you that the Tory land-grabber and the Liberal money-grubber are killing the wheat fields of England?

Oh, John, and *you* call yourself a practical man. And you don't even know that men live by bread, and think me a fool when I tell you so.

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