

CHAPTER X

THE SERVITUDE OF TO-MORROW

WE have seen how the private ownership of the land was evolved from the common ownership of the land through the control of the governments of Europe by the feudal aristocracy; how tenancy is but the cash equivalent of the earlier relationship of lord and vassal, of master and serf, a relationship which historians assume was destroyed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. We have further seen how competitive rents have been substituted for the customary services of an earlier age, by means of which those who use the land are subject to an increasing tribute for the privilege of living upon the earth.

Private land ownership is now complete. This is true of practically all the world. Those who come after us must come as trespassers. They must pay a competitive price for the right to live. Future generations will be born into servitude. Permission to work must now be had of another, a permission which can only be secured on the payment of a price, and a price determined by the competition of another for the same opportunity. It is competition that fixes rent, and it is the power of the owner to

exact such tribute as he wills that distinguishes the servitude of to-day from that of the feudal *regime*.

We can now forecast the struggle which the future holds in store for America. The supply of land is fixed and constant. It is the same to-day as it was four centuries ago when Columbus first set foot upon the continent. No ingenuity of man can add a square foot to the earth's surface. Better means of transit, greater ease of communication, the reclamation of the desert places of the West, all these have increased the area available for cultivation. But the amount of land remains as it was when the last discoverer opened up the last continent to human habitation.

The uncertain element in the equation is the demand. This is indicated by the census returns. The decennial enumeration of peoples will determine the fierceness of the struggle for existence and the price which must be paid for the use of the earth. The birth rate is the barometer by which the returns of the landlord may be measured.

We need not go beyond the Civil War to see the rapidity of the growth of population. From 1860 to 1870, during one-half of which time the nation was convulsed with civil war and maintained more than a million men under arms, the population increased from 31,443,321 to 38,558,371, or 22.6 per cent. During the following decade, a decade which was coincident with the expansion of the West and the

projection of the Pacific Railway systems, 11,597,412 people were added to the population, or an increase of 30.1 per cent. By 1890 the population had mounted up to 62,622,250, or an increase of 24.9 per cent.; while, by the close of the century, 75,994,575 claimed allegiance to the United States, or an increase of 20.7 per cent. In forty years' time the population had increased over 141 per cent. If the population increases as rapidly during the present decade as it did during the last, America will contain 92,024,430 people in 1910. At the same rate of growth another 19,417,154 will be added by 1920. Continuing this increase, the population of America will amount to 134,955,658 souls in 1930; to 163,430,301 in 1940, and to 197,914,094 in 1950, or two and a half times the present population. By the middle of the century, at the present rate of growth, nearly 200,000,000 people will be struggling for the right to live in America. But even then people will be living at a density of but 67 per square mile, which is far from crowded in comparison with other countries or the Eastern states of America. For to-day the population of Massachusetts is 348 per mile; of Pennsylvania, 140 per mile; of Ohio, 102 per mile; and of Wisconsin, 38 per mile. The population of the German Empire is 280 per mile; of France, 188 per mile; and of little Holland, 425 per mile.

With every babe that is born the value of the land is increased, as is the tribute which its owners com-

mand for its use. The ignorant immigrant, landing at Castle Garden, possessed of nothing save the clothing suspended across his shoulders, increases perceptibly the value of the soil, upon which the laws of nature decree that he must either labor or starve. The million refugees who annually crowd to America, driven unwillingly from their native land, add to the value of the land at least half a billion dollars a year.¹ Its value responds to their coming. There are so many more hands to labor, so many more mouths to be fed, so many more human beings to struggle for an opportunity to live upon the land of promise which another has enclosed. And the 80,000,000 already here are made the poorer by their coming. The burden of rent of all the people is increased in consequence.²

Herein is the crux of the social puzzle. Herein is the explanation of increasing poverty in the midst

¹ "It has been calculated that by the mere fact of his arrival each emigrant increased by about \$400 the value of the territory of the United States."—Charles Gide, *Political Economy*, p. 458. This is an understatement. It is nearer \$1,000.

² For the five years running from 1900 to 1905, the aggregate increase in the value of all classes of farms was \$6,131,000,000. The cause of this increase in land values is indicated in the Bulletin United States Department of Agriculture, No. 44, which says: "While the public land suitable for farming has been reaching exhaustion, the flow of immigration from foreign countries has been continuing in its direction, and where no farming land could be obtained from nation, state, or railroad the influx of agricultural people was halted in regions where farms had been established in more recent years, and the consequent pressure of new demand upon a fixed area increased the value per acre during the five years often as much as fifty to a hundred per cent."

of increasing wealth; of misery, destitution, and suffering on the one hand, and unimaginable luxury and waste on the other. In this struggle for the use of the land and the speculative values to which it gives rise, is the solution of the paroxysms of industry which periodically afflict the commercial world. It is this, too, that explains the vacant fields and idle workshops, while millions of men are seeking employment.

It makes no difference whether the land is owned by a handful of ducal proprietors or by a million petty landlords, whether by English syndicates or by the well-to-do farmer of the neighboring county seat. So far as those who hereafter come into the world are concerned, the result is the same. For rent is fixed by the law of demand and supply; supply ever constant, demand increasing year by year.

This law of demand and supply, by which the dealings of the business world are conducted; this law which operates so beneficently in most instances, determining with the precision of a natural law the basis on which the products of labor will exchange, the amount of food and clothing which will be produced each year, as well as the output of ten thousand factories, mines, and workshops located in the most distant portions of the earth; this law, which adjusts production and exchange with a precision almost comparable to that which determines the amount of rain which shall fall upon the surface of the

earth, is a very cruel thing when applied to the first necessity of life which the laws of nature decree must be used by man if he would live, but which the laws of man permit to be owned by the generation which first appropriates it.

Under natural conditions this growth in population should increase the well-being of all the people rather than the well-being of the few. For just as the fisherman increases his catch by a division of labor, which frees him from the necessity of making his net or of preparing his meals; just as the hunter is able to capture more game when relieved of the necessity of making his weapons, so the productive power of society has been increased by the division of labor and the specialization of the workers which has been going on from the beginning of time. The watch we are now able to buy for a dollar once involved weeks of labor. A single workman is now so skilled in the handling of looms that he produces three hundred times as much as was possible a century ago. The cotton-spinner produces as much as did three hundred and twenty men in 1769. One operator in a cotton factory supplies the wants of two hundred and fifty men; in a woollen factory, of three hundred men, and in a shoe factory, of one thousand men. A single man produces more iron, steel, or copper than did a hundred a generation ago; he produces more than did a thousand in the seventeenth century.

This is true in almost every line of industry. This increase in the productive power of society should have long since banished poverty. For along with every pair of hands seeking work there are bodies to be clothed and stomachs to be fed. Increasing population does not mean increasing production only; it means increasing consumption as well. And the wants of man know no limit. There can be no such thing as overproduction. Even were every human being comfortably housed, adequately fed and clothed, even were all of the needs with which we are familiar amply provided for, there would arise a multitude of wants which would employ ten times our present population. Yet instead of improving the well-being of society, this increase in population, increasing as it does the value of the land and the rent which must be paid for its use, makes of necessity for poverty. It fills the tenements with sweat-shop workers, and the mines with child laborers. Some obstacle intervenes to prevent the operation of the natural laws of production and distribution; some influence diverts the gains of civilization from those whose labor produces them. This influence is the private ownership of the land which withholds the storehouse of nature from use, and appropriates through rent every increase in the productive power of society.

From now on this tribute to those who own the land must, of necessity, increase. With every babe

that is born and with every immigrant that comes to our shores the struggle for a place to live and to labor will be reflected in the value of the land. This will increase the charge which may be exacted for its use. This is the inevitable result of the law of demand and supply when applied to the land, for rent is established by the same law that fixes the exchange price of a loaf of bread or a pair of shoes. In time rent will appropriate all that the worker can produce save the margin of subsistence, below which he cannot permanently go. Even this will not be secure, for men will offer more for the land than they can produce upon it in the hope of warding off starvation.

This tendency is already manifest. It is this that explains the spirit of unrest that is expressing itself all over the country. John Stuart Mill has described the result of increasing population in the case of Ireland. He had in mind the agricultural workers. But the result is the same in any country and under any conditions of industry. "The produce of the cottier (competitive) system," he says, "being divided into two portions, rent and the remuneration of the laborer, the one is evidently determined by the other. The laborer has what the landlord does not take; the condition of the laborer depends upon the amount of rent. But rent being regulated by competition depends upon the relation between the demand for land and the supply of it.

The demand for land depends upon the number of competitors, and the competitors are the whole rural population. The effect, therefore, of this tenure is to bring the principle of population to act directly on the land, and not, as in England, on capital. Rent, in this state of things, depends on the proportion between population and land. As the land is a fixed quantity, while population has an unlimited power of increase; unless something checks that increase, the competition for land soon forces up rent to the highest point consistent with keeping the population alive.”¹

This, then, is the servitude of to-morrow. It is not new to the world. But it is only since the seventeenth century that the law has endowed one man with legal means to take from another all that he could get.

The extent to which the growth of population, the improvements in the arts and sciences, the increase in the productive power of society, have expressed themselves in the value of the land, and the amount which has been added to the wealth of the few by the exertions of the many, will be considered in the next chapter.

¹ *Principles of Political Economy*, chap. 9.