

CHAPTER II

OUR AGRICULTURAL POSSIBILITIES AND PROBLEMS

THE explanation of these problems is not to be found in the niggardliness of nature or the character of our people. There is land enough and water enough and labor enough to produce all the food we need. As a matter of fact, the United States should be the cheapest country in the world in which to live. Ours should be a land of overflowing abundance; not for the few but for everybody; not of a few articles but of every kind of food. Wages are high, it is true, but labor is more productive here than elsewhere. We have perfected machinery as have no other people, and it is more universally used. We have resources more fertile than those of all Europe. We have every variety of climate and every kind of food. The soil is so fertile that it needs but little enrichment, while our race is recruited from the most versatile in Europe. No people have been so inventive; none have harnessed steam and electricity to increase the power of man, and nowhere, unless it be in Australia, is there so large a product per man as in the United States. There should be no difficulty about food, fuel, houses to live in, or

any of the ordinary comforts of life if we had conserved and utilized our opportunities as we should have done.

And there was no food problem up to a very few years ago. Food was very cheap. This was true of all the staple articles, of meat, vegetables, fruits, poultry, and dairy products. Food was so cheap that we wasted it. Even the poor wasted it as of little value. There were no high-cost-of-living investigations and no real complaint from the farmer or consumer.

There is, obviously, land enough to feed ourselves and all our friends, and feed them in abundance. Of that there is no doubt. We could maintain ten times our present population if the land were cultivated as it is in some portions of the world where intensive agriculture has been perfected. The farm acreage of the United States is nearly seven times that of Germany, with her 67,000,000 people, or of France, with 40,000,000 people. This is without considering the billion odd acres not yet appropriated or unavailable for cultivation, which is equal to all the land under tillage at the present time.¹

¹The total area of the United States, exclusive of Alaska, is 3,026,789 square miles or 1,937,144,960 acres. Of this total 290,759,000 acres remain unappropriated for one reason or another, while 16,522,000 acres are still in public or Indian lands. In 1910 there were 6,361,502 farms in the country and 478,451,750 acres in improved and 400,446,575 acres in unimproved farms. All told, the farm acreage of the United States in 1910 was 878,798,325 acres. Of the total area of the country only one-fourth was in improved farms.

France almost feeds herself, while in Germany, with all her intensive agriculture, there are great stretches of land that are held in great estates and are in a backward state of cultivation; and Germany could be placed inside the State of Texas and leave enough room round about the edges for Switzerland.

We have not yet begun to crowd one another in this country, for people are living at the rate of only 33 per square mile. In little Belgium, the land of intensive agriculture, there are 671 persons to the square mile; in France there are 191; in the United Kingdom, 379.47; in Austria-Hungary, 197.31; in Switzerland, 236.97, and in Denmark, which country feeds herself and contributes a great part of the food supply of Great Britain and Germany, there are 183.56 persons per square mile.

Only a small part of the land in the United States is cultivated at all, and a much greater part is cultivated wastefully or inadequately. Only about one-half of our cultivable area is under cultivation. Even in the State of New York, with the best and most extravagant market in the world at its doors, only 37 per cent. of the agricultural acreage is under cultivation, or 8,200,000 acres out of 22,000,000 acres. And in that State, with its population of 10,000,000 people, only 375,000 are agriculturalists, and 9,625,000 are engaged in other pursuits.

While we have land in abundance and of the most fertile kind, while we have invented and perfected

farm machinery, while the telephone, the trolley, the motor-car, and the railroad have made communication easy, transportation cheap, and life in the country far more attractive than a generation ago, certain things are happening to agriculture that, unless checked, will inevitably bring about conditions similar to those in Great Britain, where four-fifths of the people live in the city while the countryside is denuded of people, and the food supply of 43,000,000 people is brought in from the United States, Canada, Australia, South America, and Denmark.

Among the outstanding facts bearing on the subject are:

One—a rapid, unprecedented increase in the price of food

Two—a stationary production or substantial falling off in the gross amount of food produced.

Three—a wide-spread sense of discouragement on the part of farmers, a discouragement which is justified by conditions.

Four—a rapid increase in the population of our cities as compared with the rural population. In 1900 the urban population of the United States was 31,609,000. Ten years later the number had increased to 42,623,000, an increase of 34.8 per cent. During the same period the rural population increased from 44,384,000 to 49,348,883, or an increase of 11.2 per cent.

Five—during the decade 1900–1910 the number of farms increased from 5,737,372 to 6,361,502, or an increase of 10.9 per cent., while the total improved and unimproved land in farms increased by but 40,206,551 acres, or only 4.8 per cent. Yet while the increase in farm acreage was but 4.8 per cent. the increase in the value of the land was 118.1 per cent. The agricultural land of the country in 1900 was valued by the census at \$13,058,007,995. Ten years later it was valued at \$28,475,674,169. While the rural population increased 11.2 per cent. and the acreage under cultivation 4.8 per cent., the value of the land under cultivation increased 118.1 per cent. and the value of the land per acre 108.1 per cent.

Six—of the total of 878,798,325 acres in farms in 1910 only about one-half was improved, there being a total of 400,346,575 acres that were unimproved.

Seven—the working of farms in the United States is steadily and rapidly passing from the hands of owners to those of tenants with little interest in efficient agriculture or the improvement of their holdings. In 1880 25.6 per cent. of all farms were operated by other than owners; in 1890 the percentage had increased to 28.4 per cent.; in 1900 it had increased to 35.3 per cent., and in 1910 it had still further increased to 37 per cent. In some parts of the country from 60 to 70 per cent. of the farms are cultivated by tenants for non-resident owners.

Here are some of the economic factors underlying the food problem. They are not reassuring. They indicate a decay of agriculture. If unchecked they involve national disaster. They mean a continuing increase in the cost of living, a lower standard of living, a decadence of the state, and ultimately a nation of city dwellers on the one hand and a farming peasantry on the other, like that found in other countries where the tendencies at work in the United States have reached their logical conclusion. Rome passed through such an evolution. So did modern England. Ireland lost half her people because of bad agricultural conditions that were only arrested when the nation undertook a comprehensive agricultural policy in the land-reform legislation inaugurated by Gladstone.

America is finally awakening to the seriousness of the food problem. We may be led to a study of agriculture and the economic legislation necessary to make farming more attractive. For the ultimate evil is to be found in the economic foundations of agriculture, which must be radically changed.

First let us consider the present high cost of living and the immediate measures for relief. For that is the immediate condition to be remedied.