

## CHAPTER XX

### THE TENANT FARMER

IF one would know the reasons for the decadence of farming in the United States he should read the testimony of tenant farmers and farm-laborers gathered by the Industrial Relations Commission.<sup>1</sup> And the conditions disclosed in the Western States where the inquiry was made are the same as would have been discovered had the inquiry been made in the Southern or Eastern States. For farm tenancy is fast becoming a rule in the United States despite the almost limitless resources of the country. So long as the public domain was open to settlement men would not work as tenants or as agricultural laborers. They took up a homestead of their own. And this is always the instinct of men. They prefer to work for themselves rather than for another. It was this motive that lured immigration to the United States from the very beginning. It was this that filled up the continent by settlers who generation after generation moved westward to the Pacific Ocean. But when all the land had been taken up, when it began to acquire a speculative value, then tenancy appeared. And year by year the number of tenants has increased until in some sec-

<sup>1</sup> *Report of Commission on Industrial Relations*, vols. 1 and 10.

tions home-owning farmers are almost the exception. As early as 1880, 25.6 per cent. of all farms in the country were operated by others than owners. In 1890 the percentage had increased to 28.4 per cent. By that time most of the land had been taken up. And during the next ten years farm tenancy jumped to 35.3 per cent. By 1910 it had reached 37 per cent. In that year out of a total of 6,361,000 farms 2,354,676 were operated by tenants. Tenancy increased 16.3 per cent. during the previous ten years and farm ownership only 8.1 per cent.

It is impossible to have a healthy agriculture under the tenant system. Tenancy is destructive of good farming. It discourages initiative. It leads to shiftlessness. There is no incentive to the tenant to be a good farmer. At the end of the term, usually one year, all of the improvements made by the tenant pass to the owner. The tenant may take away the crops but nothing more. As a consequence, the tenant does nothing to improve or enrich the land. He refuses to make repairs. He selects such crops as will give an immediate return with the least possible labor. He permits the buildings and improvements to go to decay. He exhausts the land by failing to fertilize it. In time he abandons the property because it is no longer profitable.

Tenancy leads to indifferent cultivation. There

is no stimulus to efficiency. The tenant is careless. He has to pay what the landlord demands or what some other applicant will pay for the holding. If the tenant increases the fertility of the land it is made an excuse for an increase in rent. If he is thrifty and industrious, if he makes the farm more productive, if he drains and irrigates, the advantage all accrues to the owner or to some other tenant who will pay an increased rent for the property because of his exertions.

In this country the tenant has no security whatever. He may be evicted at the end of the year. Competitive tenancy such as everywhere exists in America is destructive of farming. It leads to rapid deterioration of the farm.

The Commission on Industrial Relations found that tenancy in the Southwestern States is already the prevailing method of cultivation and that it is increasing at a very rapid rate. In Texas the number of tenant farmers in 1910 was 219,571. They operated 53 per cent. of the farms in the State. In Oklahoma and other Southern States the conditions are much the same.

Speaking of the effect of tenancy on the tenant and the low standard of life which prevails among the tenant farmers, the commission states:<sup>1</sup>

“Under this (the tenant) system tenants as a class earn only a bare living through the work of

<sup>1</sup> *Report of Commission on Industrial Relations*, vol. 1.

themselves and their entire families. Few of the tenants ever succeed in laying by a surplus. On the contrary, their experiences are so discouraging that they move from one farm to the next in the constant hope of being able to better their condition. Without the labor of the entire family the tenant farmer is helpless. As a result, not only is his wife prematurely broken down but the children remain uneducated and without the hope of any condition better than that of their parents. The tenants having no interest in the results beyond the crops of a single year, the soil is being rapidly exhausted and the conditions, therefore, tend to become steadily worse. Even at present a very large proportion of the tenants' families are insufficiently clothed, badly housed, and underfed. Practically all of the white tenants are native-born. As a result of these conditions, however, they are deteriorating rapidly, each generation being less efficient and more hopeless than the one preceding.

"A very large proportion of the tenants are hopelessly in debt and are charged exorbitant rates of interest. Over 95 per cent. of the tenants borrow from some source and about 75 per cent. borrow regularly year after year. The average interest rate on all farm loans is 10 per cent., while small tenants in Texas pay 15 per cent. or more. In Oklahoma the conditions are even worse in spite of the enactment of laws against usury.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, over 80 per cent. of the tenants are regularly in debt to the stores from which they secure their supplies and pay exorbitantly for this credit. The average rate of interest on store credit is conservatively put at 20 per cent., and in many cases ranges as high as 60 per cent.

<sup>1</sup> See Chapter XXII, "The Farmer and the Banker."

“The leases are largely in the form of oral contracts which run for only one year and which make no provision for compensation to the tenant for any improvements which may be made upon the property. As a result, tenants are restrained from making improvements, and in many cases do not properly provide for the up-keep of the property.

“Furthermore, the tenants are in some instances the victims of oppression on the part of landlords. This oppression takes the form of dictation of character and amount of crops, eviction without due notice, and discrimination because of personal and political convictions. The existing law provides no recourse against such abuses.

“As a result both of the evils inherent in the tenant system and of the occasional oppression by landlords, a state of acute unrest is developing among the tenants, and there are clear indications of the beginning of organized resistance which may result in civil disturbances of a serious character.

“The situation is being accentuated by the increasing tendency of the landlords to move to the towns and cities, relieving themselves not only from all productive labor but from direct responsibility for the conditions which develop. Furthermore, as a result of the increasing expenses incident to urban life there is a marked tendency to demand from the tenant a greater share of the products of his labor.

“The responsibility for the existing conditions rests not upon the landlords but upon the system itself. The principal causes are to be found in the system of short leases, the system of private credit at exorbitant rates, the lack of a proper system of marketing, the absence of educational facilities,

and last but not least the prevalence of land speculation.

“A new factor is being introduced into the agricultural situation through the development of huge estates owned by corporations and operated by salaried managers upon a purely industrial system. The labor conditions on such estates are subject to grave criticism. The wages are extremely low, 80 cents per day being the prevailing rate on one large estate which was thoroughly investigated; arbitrary deductions from wages are made for various purposes; and a considerable part of the wages themselves are paid in the form of coupons, which are in all essential particulars the same as the “scrip” which has been the source of such great abuse. Furthermore, the communities existing on these large estates are subject to the complete control of the landowning corporation, which may regulate the lives of citizens to almost any extent. There is an apparent tendency toward the increase of these large estates, and the greatest abuses may be expected if they are allowed to develop unchecked.”

Tenancy is another explanation of the condition of agriculture in the United States. And students of the subject, from John Stuart Mill down to date, have condemned tenancy as a curse to a state. It is a curse not only to the tenant but to the nation as well. It is destructive of self-respect and independence. It leads to ignorance, to improvidence, to the decay of agriculture. Every nation in Europe that has tolerated tenancy has had to pay the price of it, whether it be in Ireland, England, and

Scotland or in Prussia, Russia, Austria-Hungary, or Belgium. The political and social condition of the people, the reaction and the class rule, the ignorance and the poverty, the decadence of the peasantry are inevitable consequences of attempting to build a state on a system of farm tenancy, which is but the modern equivalent for the old feudal relationship of master and serf. Many of the countries of Europe have realized the results of the system, notably Denmark, France, and Great Britain in Ireland. Systems of state aid to tenants who would be owners have been worked out while security for improvements and fixity of tenure have been insured by law. America almost alone among the nations has left the tenant to shift for himself unprotected by the state in any way.