A GREAT AMERICAN

At a time when the President of the American Republic is busy, even in solemn state papers in exhorting us to stand "as sons of men who had iron in their blood," against wholly imaginary perils—at a time when nothing more formidable confronts the national purposes than a handful of half-starved little brown men in far-away Pacific islands, it may be well for the thoughtful to turn for a minute to a man who lived in the nation's really strenuous days, and who bore a splendid part in that tremendous time when the great forces of slavery and freedom were aligning for the inevitable conflict. That man is Gerrit Smith, whose name occurred in the Fall number of the "Review," (see note p. 13, No. 2, Vol. 2), and who served one term in Congress, 1853-4.

Gerrit Smith was born in Utica, N. Y., March 6th, 1797, and died in this city in 1874. He was one of the boldest of the anti-slavery leaders and he gave pecuniary assistance to John Brown, in whose affair at Harper's Ferry he was not, however, implicated. He published several works, which have long served to interest all but the curious, yet which will one day be brought to light and read with admiration for their profound political sagacity. A glance at the economic and political creed of this uncompromising apostle of freedom will interest the readers of the "Review," for this man was a single taxer in all but a knowledge of the technical application of the principle. Here is his avowal of his political creed, which in his own words, leaves him without a party.

"It acknowledges no law and knows no law for slavery; that not only is slavery not in the Federal Constitution, but that, by no possibility, could it be brought into either the Federal or a State Constitution.

"The right to the soil is as natural, absolute and equal as the right to the light and air.

"Political rights are not conventional, but natural—inhering in all persons, the black as well as the white, the female as well as the male.

"The doctrine of free trade is the necessary outgrowth of the doctrine of the human brotherhood; and that to impose restrictions on commerce is to build up unnatural and sinful barriers across that brotherhood.

"Natural wars are as brutal, barbarous and unnecessary as the violence and bloodshed to which misguided and frenzied individuals are prompted."

Such is the political creed of a man whose strong face looks out at us from the frontispiece of the volume of collected speeches before us—a face manly in its manliness, womanly in a certain womanly tenderness—(was it not Coleridge who said that every really manly man had a touch of the feminine in his make-up?) In these speeches there is a remarkable command of the vernacular. What can be better than this from one of these speeches:

"In that great day (for which, as has been sublimely said, all other days were made) when every man shall 'receive the things done in the body,' let me not be found of the number of those who have wielded civil office to bind and multiply the victims of oppression."

From a set of resolutions introduced January 16th, 1854, we quote:

"Whereas, all the members of the human family, notwithstanding all contrary enactments and arrangements, have at all times and in all circumstances as equal right to the soil as to the light and air, because as equal a natural need of one as of the other; and whereas, this equal right to the soil leaves no room to buy or sell, or give away, therefore:

"RESOLVED: That no bill or proposition should find any favor with Congress which implies the right of Congress to dispose of the public lands, or any part of them either by gifts or sale."

In these resolutions he declares that "land monopoly is the most efficient cause of inordinate and tyrannical riches on the one hand and of dependent and

abject poverty on the other—the most efficient cause of that inequality of condition so fatal to the spread of democracy and Christianity." He speaks of the right which land monopoly tramples under foot as among "those clear, essential natural rights which it is the province of government to protect at all hazards and irrespective of all consequences."

On the Homestead Bill, February 21st, 1854, he had this to say:

"I am in favor of this bill. I do not say there is not a line in it I would not have altered. But I do say that I am in favor of the substance of it. I am in favor of the bill, not for the reason that by giving up a part of the public lands the remainder will be more valuable to the government than was the whole before such occupation. Nor am I in favor of it because the occupants will afford new subjects for taxation. Nor in short am I in favor of it for any of the current and popular reasons for it. But I am in favor of the bill because I am in favor of what I interpret the bill essentially to be—let others interpret it as they will. The bill as I view it is an acknowledgment that the public lands belong not to the government but to the landless."

But he voted against the Homestead Bill after having spoken in favor of it when it was amended to limit its grant only to *white* persons. As he finely said, "I was a man before I was a land reformer."

Gerrit Smith was an individualist of a most pronounced type. He favored the abolition of the Postal system, regarding it as a form of aggression. On the question of public debts he exhibited the same mental clearness as on the other great questions.

"No doctrine," he said, "should be more indignantly scouted than the doctrine that one generation may anticipate and waste the earnings of another generation." And again: "So far from such debts being sacred and obligatory, there is the most urgent and imperative need to repudiate them."

This keen-sighted political philosopher was not a single-taxer because he had perhaps never come across anything that had shown him the way. He declared "land monopoly the chief cause of beggary;" he avowed his belief that "little beggary would remain after land monopoly is abolished. The toiling poor are the only creators of wealth. Such as ourselves are but the conduits of wealth." But his only remedy for the evils and the cause of such evils which he descried so clearly was for government to prescribe the largest quantity of land which could be held by an individual, fixed where the population is sparse at four or five hundred acres. We can see how inadequate is such solution. But the important thing is that this brave, clear-sighted American saw the primary cause of social destitution, and swept aside with hardly an allusion all the conventional cant in support of privilege and landed rights.

With what sharpness of vision he foresaw the coming conflict between the hostile forces of freedom and slavery which was to engulf the union in a great civil war. At the expiration of his term in Congress he wrote to Fred Douglass: "As you are aware I went to Congress with very little hope of the peaceful termination of American slavery.. I have returned with less." On this question, how his words ring out! How our new single-tax congressman, Hon. Robert Baker, might echo it in his first speech in the national legislature, substituting "private landownership" for the word "slavery," or leaving his very language unimpaired, for our industrial slavery is a but more insidious and dangerous, and to the masters a more convenient form, than chattel slavery.

"I am the first and perhaps I shall be the last to declare within these walls that there is no law for slavery. I say that I stand alone. And yet I am not alone. Truth is with me. I feel her inspirations."

This genuinely strenuous American—in deed as well as mouth—lived to see chattel slavery abolished. But he did not live to see all he foresaw. In 1874 he died. Five years later "Progress and Poverty" was given to the world, and with it the real war for the overthrow of industrial slavery had begun.

JOSEPH DANA MILLER.