

# THE LIBERATION OF THE PEASANT

## A LEAF FROM DANISH HISTORY

By K. J. Möller

(Translated from Mr. Möller's Brochure LAND VALUE TAXATION AND PROPERTY RIGHTS, one of the many able publications produced by the writers and pamphleteers of the Danish Henry George Movement)

*Note by the Translator.*—Far-reaching reforms in the tenure of land were carried through in Denmark in the latter part of the eighteenth century. The peasant was lifted from a state of subjection and the relation between him and his then overlord was completely changed. That relation was a feudal one and before the reforms, especially during the immediately preceding fifty years, the overlord—or proprietor—had steadily increased his prestige and power. The overlord owned his "estate" or manorial land and acted also as steward of the "peasant land" which, however, he could not alienate, nor appropriate nor make his own. He was in a real sense the "landlord" and master of the peasant, who besides cultivating (or trying to cultivate) his own peasant holding was obliged as a feudatory to render on the overlord's fields whatever service the overlord required.—A. W. M.

Most of the peasants held their land under lease. The terms were not regulated nor protected by law. The overlord could more or less dictate to the peasant what the terms should be. He could oblige the peasant to take over the occupancy of a farm, however dilapidated its condition and however lean and miserable the livestock. When the peasant had improved such a property after hard work and many privations, the overlord could step in at his death, or on surrender of the lease for other reasons, and seize all the results of his industry. For the overlord was the arbiter when the lease changed hands.

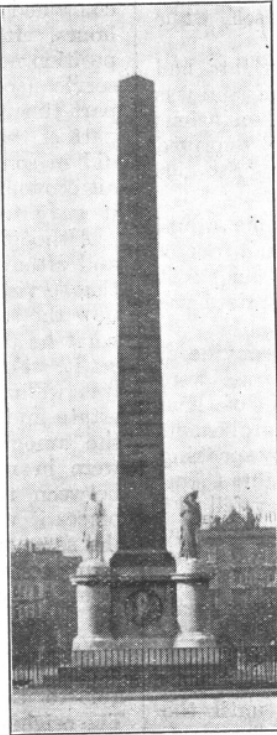
In 1787 the King issued a decree setting forth the rights of overlord and peasant with respect to each other. The overlord was required in future to deliver the farm to the peasant in good condition and with its full complement of cattle, etc. At the end of the lease the peasant was to have what was justly due to him. The overlord was no longer free to settle the terms of the lease and he was forbidden to chastise the peasant with such punishments as the "dog-hole" or the "timber-mare" or in other brutal manner.

A fit and proper decree, would be the natural verdict. We cannot easily understand that anyone would seek to oppose those reforms or would even wish it to be known that he objected to them. Nevertheless the proprietors were incensed. The change, they declared, was a "shameful infringement of landlords' lawful rights"; and disaster stared the unfortunate landlords in the face. Four proprietors in the island of Funen sent a sharply-worded protest to the Government, submitting among other alleged grievances that the decree "in effect meant ruin for the landlords" and they therefore had "cause for asking to be absolved from any more institutions of that kind." These four gentry had to beg humbly for royal pardon and in the end were glad to escape without further ado.

Compensation, however, was what the landlords claimed. What about the advantage they enjoyed while the peasant was a subordinate? Had it not been

in their power to gather the produce of all his painstaking effort? Had they not been able to bring compulsion to bear if he refused to obey their will? When they purchased their estates had they not paid for these privileges? And now the Government had put an end to that traffic. Therefore they said they should have compensation—compensation because they were no longer permitted to despoil and maltreat the poor and helpless.

They said it and they genuinely believed it, and pretty much the same view is held by some of our fellow-men to-day. When we proclaim that what the many create by joint effort and joint contribution shall be their property; when we demand that land value which is due alone to the presence and activity of the whole people shall accrue to the people as a whole, we find many of the so-called landowners engaging in the argument to talk about compensation. But if we are to take up this argument, should not those rather have compensation who have been deprived of their rights—the many who year in and year out, from generation to generation, have been forced to render up the fruit of their work, their service to society, and hand it over to some few individuals? Thousands and many thousands have dragged out their lives in poverty and have had to see their children left in the same pit of misery, just because the earnings of their labour were taken from them and human laws denied them the rights to life which the eternal laws of justice gave them. Here and in our own time we have a real and pleasant duty to perform—the duty of helping the people to gain their rights. It should be a point of honour to us, the successors of those who in their time were helped out of a state of oppression, that we shall give our efforts toward the



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fulfilment of this task.

### THE PEASANT'S RELEASE FROM VILLENAGE

The most serious blow that befell the proprietors was the liberation of the peasant in 1788. Before then the peasant was obliged to remain on the estate where he was born. He was a villein, bound to the soil. Villenage was abolished and in the course of a few years the peasant had full personal freedom to stay or go as he wished.

The proprietors—the overlords—had been hard put to it in the years just preceding. They had been the object of systematic abuse in the press and reckless spoliation on the part of the Government—so they thought and said. But this last measure was the worst of all. It was an encroachment of the basest kind upon their rights. Had they not bought their property on the understanding that the peasant must remain on the estate and work for the proprietor? And now the Government set free all those people who should produce the landlord's daily bread! And that without giving the harassed landlord any compensation!

As the bee, always active, brings honey to the comb to suit man's purpose, so had the peasant garnered wealth for the landlords on the fields where he was compelled to work. And as bees are left with just enough for their own sustenance of the honey they gather, so the peasant got but a miserable competence for all the sweat of his brow. The overlord had it in his power to take the rest.

And now these hard-working peasants were free to wander—they were to be allowed to escape, all these busy bees. And the landlord was left behind, the lonely occupant of his dearly bought fields. Without peasants, the land would be as a hive without bees.

So it is. The land in itself has no value. It acquires a value only when people must dwell on it. The profit is then the landlord's for he can lie a-bed, if he wishes, and reap the harvest of work done by those who occupy his land. He can rest at ease or enjoy himself, while his bees produce for him.

The proprietors declared their property rights had been violated. Yet not a single square yard of land was taken from them. They kept their splendid mansions and their wonderful gardens. They were not deprived of as much as a stick or a stone. But they cried out against the trespass on the rights of property!

The fact is that their property—or as some would have it, their "capital"—consisted in the main not of concrete things like houses and cultivated fields; it consisted essentially in the power to appropriate the earnings of other men's labour.

Opponents of the land reforms were never convinced, while the struggle was on, that these reforms were either just or necessary. It is true that most of them admitted that perhaps there was room for improvement in the condition of the peasants. But generally speaking the existing order was best, even for the peasants themselves. For who was to help them when they fell ill? Who was to provide them with seed when they had none? Who was to stand by the peasants when for any reason they were in difficulty? They could not do without the assistance of the overlord. Despite all that, last but not least, the reforms would lead to the landlord's undoing.

The proprietors on the islands (Zealand, Funen, etc.) fought a desperate fight which continued until the "pernicious" reforms were carried. When all opposition had proved in vain, they accepted their fate and awaited their ruin with quiet resignation.

The position was rather different in Jutland. There the proprietors still refused to give in. They did not intend to submit without remonstrance to this "infamous violation of their property rights." In 1790 many of them were assembled in Viborg and they agreed to send the Regent, the Crown Prince Frederick, a "felicitation" on the occasion of his wedding which was being celebrated in South Jutland at that time. It was certainly a remarkable message. Its tenor may be judged by the following sentence:—

"We have reason to fear the dissolution of our estates, interference with our rights as established by law and the restriction of our liberties. It will not take long before we are reduced to poverty and general disturbance will prevail. Ruin and misery are in store for the country and posterity. We have had to suffer the loss of one privilege after another and most pitiable for us in the way in which our interests as proprietors are being injured."

They went on to state that "the changes now taken place had speedily proved so mischievous that landed estates had, it was reckoned, lost two-thirds of their

value." The "felicitation" was signed by 103 proprietors.

Stronger words could hardly have been used and we have no doubt they were written in all sincerity when we remember they were addressed to an absolute ruler and that the laws calling forth such complaint had already taken effect. But it was no use. The Crown Prince (acting as Regent for the King) and his advisers stood fast. A great achievement had been brought to completion.

#### WHAT THE RESULT WAS

With the release of the peasant from villenage (his liberation from the condition of being bound to the soil) "Denmark," writes Falbe Hansen, "took the most decisive step in the domain of agriculture from the old order to the new."

A curious statement many will think, for the decree contained no provision for higher wages or shorter hours. It did not deal with the peasant's political position nor touch the question of abolishing the feudal service (socage?) which compelled the peasant to work part time on the landlord's fields and so pay in labour part of the rent for his peasant land. Yet the decree did in some measure build what is the foundation of all economic well-being and individual development—it gave freedom.

Although the service requiring labour still continued, and although the landlord could still demand through that service as much as he could get, the position was not now the same. As superior he could certainly demand what he thought he was entitled to, but he could not get it. For if he insisted upon more than the peasant was willing to give, the latter was free to leave the estate and go elsewhere. Thus in the years to follow the amount and the duration of the labour-service were in most parts settled by voluntary agreement between the peasant and the proprietor. In many places it was commuted for a money payment, and in the same way peasants in large numbers bought their farms outright. And as for those who still leased their farms, they no longer suffered humiliating treatment at the hands of the overlord.

Very large areas of land that proprietors could no longer hold were sold to people who were willing and able to use them and the land was better cultivated. The original "peasant land" was also much improved; new fields came under the plough and many farms were moved out from the confines of the village to the open country. Where there had been huddled villages with large unclosed fields surrounding them, the countryside was now occupied by holdings and dwellings spread out in every direction. Values of farms rose greatly, being trebled in the course of the following twenty-five years.

Not only the peasants gained by the reforms. The benefit was shared by the proprietors. "Formerly both proprietors and peasants were stinted; now wealth gushed out of the ground," writes Johan Ottosen. When the land reforms were being enacted, "the embittered proprietors could only hold on to their estates and fume over the work of destruction that went on, until they gradually realised that the hated reforms brought good to them too and greatly increased the value of their estates" (Edv Holm). Even Guldberg,

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a former Prime Minister who had passionately fought the reforms to the uttermost—he who had declared the peasant could not be freed from his yoke without shaking society to its foundations and had branded the reforms as a gross invasion of property rights—had to admit later that “everything considered” the rights of property had not been injured in any way.

Johan Ottosen writes in OUR HISTORY: “The grand results of the land reforms may be pictured thus: Economic benefit for the proprietors; economic benefit for the peasants, and for them as for all the country population, the liberty of the person; for the Danish nation as a whole—progress.” Such was the outcome of the reforms which had caused such an uproar and had driven the proprietors to despair.

And it is well to bear in mind that by far the most important of the laws enacted was not a new law properly so called, but the repeal of an old law. It untied the binding strings of old—it gave freedom. And the freedom so given effected in a short time what no legislation, however many its provisions, could have accomplished. And we may remember too it was just during the “age of enlightenment” that a large section of the people—especially the upper class—was short-sighted enough to contest laws at the same time beneficial, just and natural.

To-day every child in Denmark knows that what happened some 100 years ago, in particular the abolition of villenage, was a praiseworthy event and hardly anyone would now venture to defend the conditions of those days. Every child has learnt that Bernstorff, Reventlow and Colbjørnsen were among the greatest men in Danish history; and we all honour them for their love of justice, their clear vision, their fidelity, their courage.

Truly, it is thus that great men and great deeds appear in the eyes—of posterity.

## THE NEW SLAVERY IN KENYA

Under this caption Dr. Norman Leys contributes an informing article to the Labour paper, the DAILY HERALD, London, 28th June, from which we quote:—

“The courts of law have decided that the natives of Kenya are merely tenants at will of the Crown. Most of the land in Kenya is impossible to cultivate because there is not enough rain. Of the parts that are capable of cultivation the Government has given at least half to Europeans.

“The census just taken shows that there are 1,700 European landholders in the country. The land that has been left to the natives is so overcrowded that many families have only three or four acres each.

“An official paper just published proves that one European got 100,000 acres to begin with. Since he got them, at least another 200,000 acres have passed through his hands or remain in them, and he has sold nearly all his original grant for a profit of more than £200,000.

“*These estates are of no use to their owners unless they can get the natives of the country to work for them.* The Government has made them do that. It could do so because the natives had no votes and were, in fact, powerless to resist any order the Government gave them.

“It admits now that this policy of making the natives leave home to work for Europeans was unjust, and claims both that the natives have been made free to earn their living by selling what they grow at home if they prefer doing that to working for wages, and that arrangements are being made to make the land that still remains to the natives perfectly secure to them.

### “False Claims

“Both these claims are false. Instead of making the tribes themselves the owners of their own land, as they are in Nigeria, in British West Africa, the Government is putting each tribe's land into the hands of a board or committee, of which one member is to be a native and the rest either officials or European employers.

“So that when a native asks who the land belongs to under these new arrangements, he will find out that it belongs partly to the people who he believes have robbed him and partly to the receivers of the property that has been stolen from him. And in truth these boards will be just as likely to continue the robbery.

“The claim that the native producer is being given an equal chance with the European planter is also untrue. For example, the Government makes those natives who prefer to live at home make their own roads and bridges. The men who are forced to do the work are not even paid for it.

“But outside these reserves, in the parts where the Europeans live, these public works are paid for out of the taxes. And these taxes are for the most part paid by the Africans of Kenya.

### “The New Slavery

“The fact is that up to five years ago the Africans of Kenya were slaves. The slavery was of a new kind. People in this country would not have tolerated the old kind, so, as the Government wanted to satisfy the European landlords, it had to invent a new one.

“Kenya at present is half a slave State and half a free State. It cannot stay like that. It is part of the duty of the Labour Movement, and it ought to be part of the programme of the Labour Party to make it all free.”

\* \* \*

We are indebted to the writer for this word in season, but whatever will the Labour Party make of it? We have italicized the sentence that gives the key to the position: “These estates are of no use to their owners unless they can get the natives of the country to work for them.” Just so, not capitalism, but land withholding is what has robbed the native of his freedom. His fair share of Nature's bounties would provide him with an alternative to the wages of slavery. Given this status he could without any organization bid defiance to his masters and without any general strike rob them of their will to power. Deprived of this alternative the native is chained to the “new slavery”; but to see this system in practice we do not require to go as far as Kenya. The workers in this country carry on with the paltry pittance land monopoly allows. They, too, are under the “new slavery,” and the Labour Party they look to for redress are without any defined policy calculated to bring nearer the day of emancipation. God help the disfranchized natives of Kenya if they are to rely on the politicians of England for light and leading.

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