

The Single Tax, June, 1897

Review of the book: **A Single Tax Story**, by Robert H. Cowdrey (Published, by the Schulte Publishing Co., Chicago, U.S.A.)

The purpose of this book is to explain the Social Problem in a manner that will be grasped by the ordinary reader, to whom works on economics do not too readily appeal. It is well written, and the interest of the reader is sustained throughout its 240 pages. The story begins by an incident only too common in society to-day, namely, an outcast "tramp" soliciting the price of a night's lodging from a passer-by, who happens in this instance to be a millionaire. The tramp, Edgar Bartlett, tells the same old story of failure in the social struggle, and is assisted by Mr. Seers, the millionaire, into business as a merchant, from which he is successfully carried into a position of material prosperity. He afterwards establishes a colony, the name of which is "Freeland." The Single Tax is in operation, and the colony becomes the wonder and envy of neighbouring districts. A syndicate of capitalists take adjacent land on syndicate lines. The promoters are much concerned at the progress of Freeland, and an attempt, which is very interesting, is made to reduce it to present-day commercial ideas through the ruin of Mr. Bartlett, and by sending paid emissaries into the colony to corrupt the inhabitants. This conspiracy ends in failure, however, and Freeland creates a new world where peace, prosperity and happiness take the place of the poverty, want and crime that are now so well known. The following is from the chapter on

THE SEQUEL TO "ROBINSON CRUSOE."

The writer devoted a few lines to the description of how Crusoe was shipwrecked on the island, how he won his man Friday, and then proceeded to tell how other shipwrecked sailors were forced by fate to join him, and how all by general consent came to regard Crusoe as the natural ruler and owner of the place.

Then he told how Crusoe and his men were compelled to work like beavers to obtain enough food, because their capacity to produce was limited by their crude means of catching fish with wooden spears. As it took all their time to obtain food, they had but few of the comforts of life. Still they were happy and contented, because each one had all lie produced, and each new-comer was

welcomed and given a chance. At last one of the islanders, through his inventive skill, was able to fashion fish-hooks, and thus increased the number of fish they could catch to such an extent that they all rejoiced at the prospect of having time to make their lives more comfortable while on shore.

But as soon as Crusoe saw they could produce more than they needed for themselves, he himself left off fishing, and took from the fishers almost all of the increase, and they were but little better off than before. Then another fisher fashioned a seine out of the wreckage that was strewn along the shore. Again Crusoe took nearly all of the increased production, so that he soon had more than he could use. Then he called in some of the fishers from their nets and offered them as many fish as they could catch for themselves if they would work for him in making his surroundings more comfortable, by supplying him with such luxuries as they could produce. This they readily consented to do, and after he had paid them their wages he sold the surplus to the captains of the trading ships that now came to the island, and in exchange received many things that were better than his men could make, and many things they could not make at all.

Thus each invention that increased the productive power of the people simply added to the wealth of Crusoe; but the producers received only a very small share. With this little share, however, the fishers struggled to improve their condition, and so they left the best makers of clothing and shelter to stay on shore to make those things, while the best fishers devoted all their time to fishing, and were able to pay them out of the surplus thus obtained.

Now these labour-saving inventions increased so rapidly that Crusoe could not dispose of all that was produced, and to stop the over-production he refused to allow the poorest grade of fishers to continue fishing, and they were turned away in idleness to starve. When these men found there were no other opportunities open to them, they went to Crusoe and offered to work for just enough to keep them from starvation, and Crusoe contrived to give them employment by discharging some of the other fishers, and giving their places to these men. Then began a desperate struggle for the privilege of working, in which the men in every occupation were forced to bid against each other until their wages were so low that the poorest of the workers could not live on what was left after Crusoe had been paid. These lost hope and all ambition, and became beggars in the streets.

The people saw them travelling from place to place, vainly looking for some means whereby they might relieve the misery of their lives. Crusoe soon discovered that the young men could live on less than those who had families to support, and gave them employment until he forced the men with families to work for the same wages he paid the unmarried men. This forced the wives and daughters into service to assist in their own support; and, seeing this, the young men refused to marry and assume so great responsibility. And by this means crime was made to prosper in the land.

Soon all the men and women, and the little children too, were straining all their powers in the struggle for existence, until their health and strength and reason were broken by the strain. The wealth of the island was greater. Each year saw it piling higher and higher. Crusoe's storehouse was running over with the abundance, and his granaries were bursting with wealth. Poverty and crime were constantly increasing, though the prisons were full and poor-houses were running over. The fishers were filled with lamentations, and business men were blindly hoping for better times. And each class was laying all the blame on the other.

When Crusoe saw the discontent among the people he called about him certain of their leaders, to whom he gave special rights and privileges for themselves, and he sent them out among the people to make them satisfied with their lot; and to those in actual distress they were instructed to give some little aid. These leaders then became the strong allies of Crusoe; they grew wealthy from the riches their special grants and privileges gave them, and a small share they presented to the very needy as charity.

But the eyes of the workers and the business men were finally opened by the terrible strain, and they saw that all alike were suffering from the same cause. They joined their forces, went to Crusoe and demanded that they be heard. But Crusoe was too wise a ruler to wait for them to seem to urge him. He told them that he had long and carefully studied their condition, and that he now saw that all they needed was more work; that he had found a way to make work plenty for them all; that, whereas, in times past, the merchant ships from foreign shores had been allowed to freely land the goods that others made, in the future he would tax them, and thus prevent them from bringing things his people wanted in exchange for those they desired to sell. "In this way my people can be given work

making these things for themselves," said Crusoe. His glowing words of promise of the prosperity so sure to follow set the people rejoicing, and Crusoe was greatly magnified in their eyes.

Then the fishers' boats were drawn up on shore, and their nets were folded away, and the people were set to work making these things for themselves. They sang and danced, and were happy once more as they thought of the way that Crusoe had made work for them all. But when their work was done, and their wages were paid, they found that Crusoe had taken just as much as before. Then it was that they set to thinking, and studying the means by which, with all their labour, Crusoe was growing richer while they were all growing poorer. The farmers and merchants and all the other industrious people came together, and one among them arose and declared: "The priests and leaders are but a part of Crusoe's scheming to take tribute from our toil. Let us boldly ask him why we should give him any portion of our production. For, so long as we do it, he no doubt will gladly take it, and we shall lie his slaves forevermore."

Then the people sought Crusoe and demanded by what right he took tribute on their toil.

"Well," said Crusoe, "I own this island, and have a right to charge you for its use. I could sell it for many millions, but to do so would take me from you, and this I know you do not desire, for someone must employ you; and I could not if I sold the land. It may seem a heavy burden to pay me this large share; still I hold that in all justice, six per cent, is not too large a portion for my part."

Then the people boldly demanded that Crusoe show them by what right he held the island as his own.

"By the consent of all the people," was Crusoe's prompt reply.

"That was when they were deluded into thinking that it made no difference whether you or they were owners. Now they see that this has given you the power to oppress them by laying tribute on their toil, and while you are growing richer, they on all sides are growing poorer, until some are starving in the streets. Now, if to each is given all he earns, there will be no paupers with us. There will be want and misery no more. We will leave you all you have taken in the times

that have gone by; but from this time and forever to the people who must live here and the children who succeed them this island shall belong."

"Now," said Crusoe, "I have waited for this moment to arrive. You speak truly of the time when you thought it made 110 difference whether you or I were the owner of this land. You have seen that each invention, each improvement you have made, only added to the tribute I received. All your bidding against each other only added to my store. I remember quite distinctly when we lived and worked together, and in all the island there was not a discontented man. For my part, I have not been happy as in the days gone by; and to you the lesson has been severe. Let us now, for all the future, give each one the perfect freedom to trade, to live, and to labour, without paying tribute to any man."

And from that day the people were prosperous and contented. The prisons and poor-houses were destroyed; the young men took the maidens, and the old men their wives from unwomanly work, because they were able to support them, and feared neither poverty nor want. And all the people prospered, each according to his ability and industry. That is the story, almost word for word."