

CHAPTER I.

THE HIGHER LAW OF PROPERTY STATED AS SCIENCE AND ETHICS.

Political economy, in its latest results, has found the principle of property to be a very simple one — a law graven directly in the structure of the universe, and thus derived immediately from the Absolute; or, if we prefer the language of religion, we may say commanded of God.

All nature — the cosmos — exists in some degree and variety of two forms: the conscious, including sentiency, and the unconscious, or what we ordinarily comprise in matter. But matter — the unknowing, the imperceptive, the unliving — has no object, no existence for itself: it exists for the living, the perceptive, the knowing, which alone has the functions to utilize it. So matter is created in the relation of property: it is the estate and the birthright of the conscious. Under this universal and fundamental law, — this constitution of the Absolute, — man, standing at the head of consciousness and sentiency on his own planet, is the natural proprietor, the necessary administrator of the earth. He owns it while he lives on it. Being put upon it, he was sent to occupy it. His life consists in possessing it.

But, for the reason that the title of the conscious to the unconscious vests directly in — the structure of the Absolute — the relation of all mind to all matter, — the possession is joint and common. No one man has the holding. The birthright of every human being is his equal share.

In this ultimate analysis of property, reaching what Kant would term a "category" — one of those complete generalizations beyond which there is nothing to say, — we can readily see why the question of ownership has never been seriously considered by any of the world's astute thinkers, from Aristotle to John Stuart Mill, without the cognition, more or less distinct, that what the author of "Economics" called "the bounty of nature," must necessarily be the general possession of each generation that comes to inhabit the earth. Practically, indeed, as well as logically, there is no other ground on which to stand. For, if man's possession of the earth were not a common right, the occupation and monopoly of one man could, by simple exclusion, destroy another man's life; and the continuance of such exclusion and destruction would leave neither life nor title in anybody. And such has been the precise historical fact through all the "good old times" of rapine and murder, of which our present forms of government, with their legal codes, are the odds and ends.

But, in this indefeasible right of mankind to equality of access to the bounty of nature,

no question arises concerning the equality of human beings in their individual composition. There is no occasion for some acrid, impatient Carlyle to draw the contrast between Judas Iscariot and Jesus Christ, and ask if one is to be held equal to the other. Who supposes that, when Thomas Jefferson sat down to draft the Declaration of American Independence, he would have admitted, for an instant, that George the Third was equal in understanding to Benjamin Franklin, or equal in kingliness of soul to George Washington? We may even assert, if we please, with the almost startling frankness of a recent writer, that "some men are undoubtedly inferior to some dogs in nobility of character." As widely as men differ in character, quite as widely do they differ in ability. And with the power to do must always be joined the right to have. As, in the structure of the universe all mankind are equal in the title to a joint share of the world they are born to occupy, so, under the same conformation of the Absolute no two men are equal in the capacity to occupy the world and utilize their birthright, — the capacity, that is, to acquire, save, and employ wealth. It is not to be doubted that some men are born to be rich, and some poor. Some are laborious, intelligent, and thrifty; others are lazy, improvident and reckless. These two classes cannot share alike, and no just or reasonable condition of society can ever enable them to share alike, in the wealth that the one creates and the other does not. They can only be afforded *equal opportunities at the start*, and thus each be made strictly and directly responsible for all further differences and consequences.

That no two persons in the world are exactly equal in special endowments is something that sanity, not to say common-sense, never doubts. Nevertheless, all persons in the world are precisely equal in the general relations of man to his environment. All are equal in the necessity of birth and death; equal in their dependence on matter to sustain earthly life; equal in the right to live, each according to his individuality, without suppressing or destroying the individuality of others. But human beings cannot be equal even in the bare, natural right to live, without natural equality of access to the common means of all human existence. ¹ By these presents, therefore, — the construction of the universe and the will of God, — be it known that mankind jointly hold the original, indefeasible title-deed to all the kingdoms of the world.

Thus it is the whole human race who constitute the owner, and the only sovereign-owner, of the globe; and it is the people of any country who constitute the owner, and the only sovereign-owner, of that country. The original landlord — the landlord by divine right — is mankind.

But now the question arises: What is the law. which commands this sovereign himself — this landlord of all wealth — in utilizing his estate? But this means simply: How shall he dispose of his numerous and varied holdings to the best advantage? How shall

he draw from his wealth the largest income for himself — that is, for the common good?

Here is the question of the distribution of wealth according to the natural, the divine, and absolute law of its ownership. And the question has been answered. The answer, moreover, is so simple, so clear, so just, that, when once announced, it establishes itself like a command of the decalogue or a demonstration of geometry.

To begin with, the people, as a whole, stand in precisely the same relation to their inheritance as that in which any owner of extensive and varied wealth stands to his property. They can make their estate profitable only by dividing it up and putting it in possession of those competent to handle it — that is, in the hands of those who want it and are able to pay the best price for the use of it. In other words, the whole question of the rightful distribution of a people's property resolves itself into one word, *rent* — "*natural rent*."

But how can the vast common estate of the people — say the people of the United States — be put to rent in the interest of its real owner? And what is the proper rent to be collected?

This question is rather new, and no less strange. Yet it is quite easy to translate our principle of philosophy, of religion, of ethics, into the results of mathematics.

The people own the earth — own it while they live on it, — each generation while they possess it. But the people die. Turning to the tables of statistics, we find that two in every hundred die yearly. Now, if such is the case, two per cent. of a country's wealth falls back annually into the common estate. If, at the death of every citizen who now passes away from the earth, his effects should be seized by their sovereign owner, it would take just 50 years for the reversion of present individual property to the general store. But this direct reversion is not the thing wanted; for the whole property would only have to be again distributed into individual hands, in order to make it yield its full value to any one.

If we consider the matter a moment, however, we perceive that the table of human mortality — the average death-rate — fixes the precise annual share of the people in all property. If the wealth of the earth reverts from one generation to another every 50 years, then one fiftieth, or just 2%, reverts in one year. Thus the interest of the estate — what must be termed the "natural rent" of it — is exactly 2% *ad valorem*. The share of the sovereign owner, therefore, may be simply levied and collected in the form of a tax.

The general principle here announced has come into the world to stay. It is one of those truths which, once discovered, taunts us with blindness that we have not always seen it. It is self-evident — that is, it has become a necessary birth in the evolution of reason and nature on this planet.

And in an epoch, not only of the omnipresent newspaper, but of the telegraph and telephone as well, how much has been done toward the next revolution in government, the next regeneration of society, when the fundamental law of the movement has been fully determined! Behold the law and consider. It necessitates an addition to our American Declaration of Independence. All men are "created equal": — they are "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty" and PROPERTY.

It should be understood, however, that not in itself, not necessarily or even excusably, is there any danger, any strife or violence, in this next inevitable step of social and governmental progress. It is no wild claim of one-eyed communism. It is no weak theory of well-meaning but impracticable socialism. For it takes strictly into account all the qualities, good and bad, of human nature. It does not expect to eradicate selfishness and greed, or to level organic differences and their unavoidable associations and sequences. It purposes only to employ these facts and factors of actual existence in such a way that they shall serve society, as a whole, quite as much as they now assist any individual member of it at the expense of the other members. The use of lightning was once supposed to be the shattering of trees and houses, and the flashing of wrath from the gods. We bottle it now and send it round the globe on errands.

Under the law of perfect justice, — the law of the Absolute, establishing the common ownership of all wealth by all mankind, — anybody and everybody may hold property, may buy and sell, own and bequeath it, precisely as they do under the present laws and customs of force, monopoly, and chicane. But the possessors will have to pay the natural rent of it; and, so long as this rent is paid, it will be of no consequence who holds the property. It may descend from father to son, their "heirs and assigns forever." But it will be sure, in the end, to lapse into the hands of those most capable of sustaining and increasing it.

Then, at last, the nations will comprehend the true use of their Rothschilds, their Astors and Vanderbilts. The executive giants or the accretive maniacs may possess the land and the sea, if they can and wish. The more they do for themselves, the better for their sovereign landlord, the whole people. Individual capacity and individual selfishness will be one with the public weal.

In the present epoch of political larceny, legal pillage, industrial contention, and general brutality in all the economic relations of life — a state of things plainly discerned and keenly felt by every alert spirit, — plans enough are proposed on all sides for a just and bearable distribution of the world's earnings. But these plans are mostly the circumscribed eruptions of special uneasiness, and have no foundation but opinion, or some temporary antagonism. The most specious and comprehensive of them, perhaps, is the proposition to impose a graduated tax on incomes: to the end that no individual, under any circumstances, can accumulate property beyond a pre-arranged limit. Yet, where is the right, in nature or precedent, to take such a course or to fix such a limit? To tax a man's income is to put him under penalty for the superiority of his business talents and the active use of them. It is to discourage and dwarf the commendable faculty of accumulation. But, to tax his assets, is to push him to the utmost employment of that faculty, the benefits of which are shared by all society.

The world has no time for economic whims, guesses, and approximations. What is the definitive right of individual ownership, and what the definitive right of society, in the accumulated wealth of today? That is the question to be answered, before the moral sense or courage of mankind can be invoked to do any thing that will save modern civilization from impending wreck.

Well, individual ownership is entitled to just what it has got hold of, under the consent of nations and peoples groping in darkness, and knowing no better than to do and permit what has been done. There is no need of making any noise or trouble over the past. Let yesterday go bury itself. But today we live under a new dispensation — the higher law of property. It is the eleventh commandment — without which the other ten will have small opportunity of fulfilment.

Thus saith the Lord :—

Thou shalt take for all my people, each year, two parts in every hundred of whatsoever value there be on the face of the earth. That portion did I make for my people in the beginning, and I have established it unto them forever for their common good. But whatsoever value remaineth, let that be with him who hath it. For him did I make and establish that portion.

And thou shalt do no man injury to his goods who cometh under this law. But for him who rejecteth it let there be no peace. He shall be an offence unto mine eyes, and a stumbling-block before the feet of them that keep my commandments.