

THE LAND BELONGS TO THE PEOPLE

When They Take It
November 7, 1916

By Clarence Darrow

IF we could imagine some wise being somewhere in the clouds, looking down upon the earth and seeing men with their manner of life and their devious activities, we could imagine that such a being would not look upon man with the same reverence and respect with which man looks upon himself. Such a being would see great spaces of vacant land, hundreds of miles, without any population, miles and miles of fertile land with no people living on it, and would look into great huddles of men in our big cities and find a busy hive of men and women working, fighting, toiling, stealing, living five, six, ten, twenty stories up in the air, because there is not room enough on earth! He would look at man with all his goings and his comings and wonder what sort of brain he has; he would look at him and consider him far inferior to the ant who organizes his hill with system and plan and purpose so that all may live. He would think man did not understand the science of social life as well as the bee who builds his home so that all the bees may live and all have substantially the same chance for life. And such a being would doubtless wonder whether man was really worth while to bother with or to save, and would probably respect that portion of the apes who refuse to evolve into men. He certainly could not understand how man, with his method of life, his warfare upon his fellows, his ill adjustments, could claim to be the wisest and the best and the greatest and the most worth while of all the animals that live upon the earth.

This earth is a little raft moving in the endless sea of space, and the mass of its human inhabitants are hanging on as best they can. It is as if some raft filled with shipwrecked sailors should be floating on the ocean, and a few of the strongest and most powerful would take all the raft they could get and leave the most of the people, especially the ones who did the work, hanging to the edges by their eyebrows. These men who have taken possession of this raft, this little planet in this endless space, are not even content with taking all there is and leaving the rest barely enough to hold onto, but they think so much of themselves and their brief day that while they live they must make rules and laws and regulations that parcel out the earth for thousands of years after they are dead and gone, so that their descendants and others of their kind may do in the tenth generation exactly what they are doing today—keeping the earth and all the good things of the earth and compelling the great mass of mankind to toil for them.

Now, the question is, how are you going to get it back? Everybody who thinks knows that private ownership of the land is wrong. If ten thousand men can own America, then one man can own it, and if one man may own it he may take all that the rest produce or he may kill them if he sees fit. It is inconsistent with the spirit of manhood. No person who thinks can doubt but what he was born upon this planet with the same birthright that came to every man born like him. And it is for him to defend that birthright. And the man who will not defend it, whatever the cost, is fitted only to be a slave. The earth belongs to the people—if they can get it—because if you cannot get it, it makes no difference whether you have a right to it or not, and if you can get it, it makes no difference whether you have a right to it or not, you just take it. The earth has been taken from the many by the few. It made no difference that they had no right to it; they took it.

Now, there are some methods of getting access to the earth which are easier than others. The easiest, perhaps, that has been contrived is by means of taxation of the land values and land values alone; and I need only say a little upon that question. One trouble with it which makes it almost impossible to achieve, is that it is so simple and so easy. You cannot get people to do anything that is simple; they want it complex so they can be fooled.

Now the theory of Henry George and of those who really believe in the common ownership of land is that the public should take not alone taxation from the land, but the public should take to itself the whole value of the land that has been created by the public—should take it all. It should be a part of the public wealth, should be used for public improvements, for pensions, and belong to the people who create the wealth—which is a strange doctrine in these strange times. It can be done simply and easily; it can be done by taxation. All the wealth created by the public could be taken back by the public and then poverty would disappear, most of it at least. The method is so simple, and so legal even—sometimes a thing is legal if it is simple—that it is the easiest substantial reform for men to accomplish, and when it is done this great problem of poverty, the problem of the ages, will be almost solved. We may need go farther.

Henry George said, in "Progress and Poverty" that while the land tax may not bring about the dream of the socialist, it would still prepare the way for that—or for any dream.