

## CHAPTER XXV.

### THE ROBBER THAT TAKES ALL THAT IS LEFT.

In itself the abolition of protection is like the driving off of a robber.

But it will not help a man to drive off one robber, if another, still stronger and more rapacious, be left to plunder him.

Labor may be likened to a man who as he carries home his earnings is waylaid by a series of robbers. One demands this much, and another that much, but last of all stands one who demands all that is left, save just enough to enable the victim to maintain life and come forth next day to work. So long as this last robber remains, what will it benefit such a man to drive off any or all of the other robbers?

Such is the situation of labor to-day throughout the civilized world. And the robber that takes all that is left, is private property in land. Improvement, no matter how great, and reform, no matter how beneficial in itself, cannot help that class who, deprived of all right to the use of the material elements, have only the power to labor—a power as useless in itself as a sail without wind, a pump without water, or a saddle without a horse.

I have likened labor to a man beset by a series of robbers, because there are in every country other things than private property in land which tend to diminish national prosperity and divert the wealth earned by labor into the hands of non-producers. This is the tendency of monopoly of the processes and machinery of production and exchange, the tendency of protective tariffs, of bad systems of currency and finance, of corrupt government, of public debts, of standing armies, and of wars and preparations for war. But these things, some of which are conspicuous in one country and some in another, cannot account for that impoverishment of labor which is to be seen

everywhere. They are the lesser robbers, and to drive them off is only to leave more for the great robber to take.

If the all-sufficient cause of the impoverishment of labor were abolished, then reform in any of these directions would improve the condition of labor; but so long as that cause exists, no reform can effect any permanent improvement. Public debts might be abolished, standing armies disbanded, war and the thought of war forgotten, protective tariffs everywhere discarded, government administered with the greatest purity and economy, and all monopolies, save the monopoly of land, destroyed, without any permanent improvement in the condition of the laboring-class. For the economic effect of all these reforms would simply be to diminish the waste or increase the production of wealth, and so long as competition for employment on the part of men who are powerless to employ themselves tends steadily to force wages to the minimum that gives the laborer but a bare living, this is all the ordinary laborer can get. So long as this tendency exists—and it must continue to exist so long as private property in land exists—improvement (even if possible) in the personal qualities of the laboring masses, such as improvement in skill, in intelligence, in temperance or in thrift, cannot improve their material condition. Improvement of this kind can benefit the individual only while it is confined to the individual, and thus gives him an advantage over the body of ordinary laborers whose wages form the regulative basis of all other wages. If such personal improvements become general the effect can only be to enable competition to force wages to a lower level. Where few can read and write, the ability to do so confers a special advantage and raises the individual who possesses it above the level of ordinary labor, enabling him to command the wages of special skill. But where all can read and write, the mere possession of this ability cannot save ordinary laborers from being forced to as low a position as though they could not read and write.

And so, where thriftlessness or intemperance prevails, the thrifty or temperate have a special advantage which may raise them above the conditions of ordinary labor; but should these virtues become general that advantage would cease. Let the great body of working-men so reform or so degrade their habits that it would become possible to live on one-half the lowest wages now paid, and that competition for employment which drives men to work for a bare living must proportionately reduce the level of wages.

I do not say that reforms that increase the intelligence or improve the habits of the masses are even in this view useless. The diffusion of intelligence tends to make men discontented with a life of poverty in the midst of wealth, and the diminution of intemperance better fits them to revolt against such a lot. Public schools and temperance societies are thus prerevolutionary agencies. But they can never abolish poverty so long as land continues to be treated as private property. The worthy people who imagine that compulsory education or the prohibition of the drink traffic can abolish poverty are making the same mistake that the Anti-Corn-Law reformers made when they imagined that the abolition of protection would make hunger impossible. Such reforms are in their own nature good and beneficial, but in a world like this, tenanted by beings like ourselves, and treated by them as the exclusive property of a part of their number, there must, under any conceivable conditions, be a class on the verge of starvation.

This necessity inheres in the nature of things; it arises from the relation between man and the external universe. Land is the superficies of the globe—that bottom of the ocean of air to which our physical structure confines us. It is our only possible standing-place, our only possible workshop, the only reservoir from which we can draw material for the supply of our needs. Considering land in its narrow sense, as distinguished from water and air, it is still the element necessary to our use of the other elements. Without land man could not even avail himself

of the light and heat of the sun or utilize the forces that pulse through matter. And whatever be his essence, man, in his physical constitution, is but a changing form of matter, a passing mode of motion, constantly drawn from nature's reservoirs and as constantly returning to them again. In physical structure and powers he is related to land as the fountain-jet is related to the stream, or the flame of a gas-burner to the gas that feeds it.

Hence, let other conditions be what they may, the man who, if he lives and works at all, must live and work on land belonging to another, is necessarily a slave or a pauper.

There are two forms of slavery—that which Friday accepted when he placed Crusoe's foot upon his head, and that which Will Atkins and his comrades attempted to establish when they set up a claim to the ownership of the island and called on its other inhabitants to do all the work. The one, which consists in making property of man, is resorted to only when population is too sparse to make practicable the other, which consists in making property of land.

For while population is sparse and unoccupied land is plenty, laborers are able to escape the necessity of buying the use of land, or can obtain it on nominal terms. Hence to obtain slaves—people who will work for you without your working for them in return—it is necessary to make property of their bodies or to resort to predial slavery or serfdom, which is an artificial anticipation of the power that comes to the landowner with denser population, and which consists in confining laborers to land on which it is desired to utilize their labor. But as population becomes denser and land more fully occupied, the competition of non-landowners for the use of land obviates the necessity of making property of their bodies or of confining them to an estate in order to obtain their labor without return. They themselves will beg the privilege of giving their labor in return for being permitted what must be yielded to the slave—a

spot to live on and enough of the produce of their own labor to maintain life.

This, for the owner, is much the more convenient form of slavery. He does not have to worry about his slaves—is not at the trouble of whipping them to make them work, or chaining them to prevent their escape, or chasing them with bloodhounds when they run away. He is not concerned with seeing that they are properly fed in infancy, cared for in sickness or supported in old age. He can let them live in hovels, let them work harder and fare worse, than could any half-humane owner of the bodies of men, and this without a qualm of conscience or any reprobation from public opinion. In short, when society reaches the point of development where a brisk competition for the use of land springs up, the ownership of land gives more profit with less risk and trouble than does the ownership of men. If the two young Englishmen I have spoken of had come over here and bought so many American citizens, they could not have got from them so much of the produce of labor as they now get by having bought land which American citizens are glad to be allowed to till for half the crop. And so, even if our laws permitted, it would be foolish for an English duke or marquis to come over here and contract for ten thousand American babies, born or to be born, in the expectation that when able to work he could get out of them a large return. For by purchasing or fencing in a million acres of land that cannot run away and do not need to be fed, clothed or educated, he can, in twenty or thirty years, have ten thousand full-grown Americans, ready to give him half of all that their labor can produce on his land for the privilege of supporting themselves and their families out of the other half. This gives him more of the produce of labor than he could exact from so many chattel slaves. And as time goes on and American citizens become more plentiful, the ownership of this land will enable him to get more of them to work for him, and on lower terms. His speculation in land is as much a speculation in the

growth of men as though he had bought children and contracted for infants yet to be born. For if infants ceased to be born and men to grow up in America, his land would be valueless. The profits on such investment do not arise from the growth of land or increase of its capabilities, but from growth of population.

Land in itself has no value. Value arises only from human labor. It is not until the ownership of land becomes equivalent to the ownership of laborers that any value attaches to it. And where land has a speculative value it is because of the expectation that the growth of society will in the future make its ownership equivalent to the ownership of laborers.

It is true that all valuable things have the quality of enabling their owner to obtain labor or the produce of labor in return for them or for their use. But with things that are themselves the produce of labor such transactions involve an exchange—the giving of an equivalent of labor-produce in return for labor or its produce. Land, however, is not the produce of labor, it existed before man was, and, therefore, when the ownership of land can command labor or the products of labor, the transaction, though in form it may be an exchange, is in reality an appropriation. The power which the ownership of valuable land gives, is that of getting human service without giving human service, a power essentially the same as that power of appropriation which resides in the ownership of slaves. It is not a power of exchange, but a power of blackmail, such as would be asserted were some men compelled to pay other men for the use of the ocean, the air or the sunlight.

The value of such things as grain, cattle, ships, houses, goods or metals is a value of exchange, based upon the cost of production, and therefore tends to diminish as the progress of society lessens the amount of labor necessary to produce such things. But the value of land is a value of appropriation, based upon the amount that can be appropriated, and therefore tends to increase as the progress of society increases production.

Thus it is, as we see, that while all sorts of products steadily fall in value, the value of land steadily rises. Inventions and discoveries that increase the productive power of labor lessen the value of the things that require labor for their production, but increase the value of land, since they increase the amount that labor can be compelled to give for its use. And so, where land is fully appropriated as private property no increase in the production of wealth, no economy in its use, can give the mere laborer more than the wages of the slave. If wealth rained down from heaven or welled up from the depths of the earth it could not enrich the laborer. It could merely increase the value of land.

Nor do we have to appeal to the imagination to see this. In Western Pennsylvania it has recently been discovered that if borings are made into the earth combustible gas will force itself up—a sheer donation, as it were, by Nature, of a thing that heretofore could be produced only by labor. The direct and natural tendency of this new power of obtaining by boring and piping what has heretofore required the mining and retorting of coal is to make labor more valuable and to increase the earnings of the laborer. But land in Pennsylvania being treated as private property, it can have no such effect. Its effect, in the first place, is to enrich the owners of the land through which the borings must be made, who, as legal owners of the whole material universe above and below their land, can levy a toll on the use of Nature's gift. In the next place, the capitalists who have gone into the business of bringing the gas in pipes to Pittsburgh and other cities have formed a combination similar to that of the Standard Oil Company, by which they control the sale of the natural gas, and thus over and above the usual returns of capital make a large profit. Still, however, a residue of advantage is left, for the new fuel is so much more easily handled, and produces so much more uniform a heat, that the glass- and iron-workers of Pittsburgh find it more economical than the old fuel, even at the same cost. But they cannot long

retain this advantage. If it prove permanent, other glass- and iron-workers will soon be crowding to Pittsburgh to share in it, and the result will be that the value of city lots in Pittsburgh will so increase as finally to transfer this residual advantage to the owners of Pittsburgh land.<sup>35</sup> And if the monopoly of the piping company is abolished, or if by legislative regulation its profits are reduced to the ordinary earnings of capital, the ultimate result will, in the same way, be not an advantage to workers, but an advantage to landowners.

Thus it is that railways cheapen transportation only to increase the value of land, not the value of labor, and that when their rates are reduced it is landowners not laborers who get the benefit. So it is with all improvements of whatever nature. The Federal Government has acted the part of a munificent patron to Washington City. The consequence is that the value of lots has advanced. If the Federal Government were to supply every Washington householder with free light, free fuel and free food, the value of lots would still further increase, and the owners of Washington "real estate" would ultimately pocket the donation.

The primary factors of production are land and labor. Capital is their product, and the capitalist is but an intermediary between the landlord and the laborer. Hence working-men who imagine that capital is the oppressor of labor are "barking up the wrong tree." In the first place, much that seems on the surface like oppression by capital is in reality the result of the helplessness to which labor is reduced by being denied all right to the use of land. "The destruction of the poor is their poverty."

It is not in the power of capital to compel men who can obtain free access to nature to sell their labor for starvation

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<sup>35</sup> The largest owners of Pittsburgh land are an English family named Schenley, who draw in ground-rents a great revenue, thus (to the gratification of Pennsylvania protectionists) increasing our exports over our imports, just as though they owned so many Pennsylvanians.



wages. In the second place, whatever of the earnings of labor capitalistic monopolies may succeed in appropriating, they are merely lesser robbers, who take what, if they were abolished, landowners would take.

No matter whether the social organization be simple or complex, no matter whether the intermediaries between the owners of land and the owners of the mere power to labor be few or many, wherever the available land has been fully appropriated as the property of some of the people, there must exist a class, the laborers of ordinary ability and skill, who can never hope to get more than a bare living for the hardest toil, and who are constantly in danger of failure to get even that.

We see that class existing in the simple industrial organization of western Ireland or the Scottish Highlands, and we see it, still lower and more degraded, in the complex industrial organization of the great British cities. In spite of the enormous increase of productive power, we have seen it developing in the United States, just as the appropriation of our land has gone on. This is as it must be, for the most fundamental of all human relations is that between man and the planet he inhabits.

How the recognition of the consequences involved in the division of men into a class of world-owners and a class who have no legal right to the use of the world explains many things otherwise inexplicable I cannot here point out, since I am dealing only with the tariff question. We have seen why what is miscalled "free trade"—the mere abolition of protection—can only temporarily benefit the working-classes, and we have now reached a position which will enable us to proceed with our inquiry and ascertain what the effects of true free trade would be.