

II.

CONDITION OF ENGLISH AGRICULTURAL LABORERS.

THE following communication, from Mr. William Saunders, of London, was called forth by a letter signed "A Free-born Englishman," in which some of the statements made in Chapter X. of this book were in general terms denied.

NEW YORK, July 24, 1883.

To the Editor of Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper :

SIR—"A Free-born Englishman," who "emphatically denies" the accuracy of Mr. George's statements, is at a loss to conceive from what source he obtained his information. On this point I may enlighten him, as I can state from experience that Mr. George gained his knowledge by personal investigation in the location to which he refers. I wish that I could sustain the rose-colored view which "A Free-born Englishman" takes of the condition of the agricultural laborer in England. For fifty years I have been intimately acquainted with the state of agriculture in the southern part of the country, and during that time the standard wages have varied from one and a half to three and a half dollars per week. In Wiltshire, at the present time, the wages are from two and a quarter to three dollars per week. It must be noted that these are the wages not of boys but of married men, and that they

are the total wages; no food is given, and, as a rule, the laborers pay rent for a cottage, and always a very high rent for garden land, if they have any. Even the highest rate named is quite inadequate to provide a family with sufficient food of the plainest kind. It costs four dollars per week to provide food for five persons in the poorhouses of Wiltshire. Thus, if a man with a wife and three children spend all his wages for food he would still be short of the poorhouse allowance, which is calculated at a very low rate.

The statement of "A Free-born Englishman" that it is a rare thing for the aged of the industrial classes to go to the workhouse is entirely contrary to my experience, and I may ask how is it possible for a man to save for old age when the laborer has to maintain himself and his family upon a sum with which economical poor-law guardians cannot support paupers?

As to commons, they not only have been, but are being inclosed by the owners of land. This is also the case with spaces on the roadside, so that the working-classes have lost the means they formerly had for maintaining cows, donkeys or geese, and children have been deprived of their ancient playgrounds. As to foot-paths, these are often closed; but your correspondent is right when he says that interrupting an ancient highway excites the indignation of the people, and sometimes they tear down the obstruction. They did so recently in a case where Mr. E. P. Bouverie shut up a path near Devizes, in Wiltshire. Legal proceedings were taken, and, although it was proved that the public had enjoyed the use of the footway for over a century, yet the landlord was enabled to show that during this period the estate had been entailed, so that no owner had the power to give the public a right of way, and thus the path was closed. By these and similar provisions in laws enacted by landlords, it is possible for a landlord to

make constant encroachments upon the public; for, if he maintains a claim for twenty years it is established in his favor, but no length of time can legalize the possession by the public against a claim raised by the owners of a family estate. Thus, all the time family estates are growing and the public are losing.

In referring to a case near London, "A Free-born Englishman" is misleading your readers. The people of London insisted upon exempting an area of fifteen miles around that city from the operation of Commons Inclosure Acts, and, therefore, the instance to which he refers does not apply to England generally.

It must be puzzling to Americans to meet with such different statements respecting English laborers, and as your correspondent does not give the public his name or address, it may be allowable to test his assertions by the internal evidence which his letter affords on the subject of his accuracy. He boldly asserts that "an equal distribution of property is the general principle that underlies" Mr. George's article. I challenge him to refer to a single paragraph in any of the voluminous writings of Mr. George which justifies the idea that he advocates an equal distribution of property. Mr. George's writings are a protest against the confiscation by landlords of property created by industry, and the statement that he advocates an equal distribution of property is entirely unfounded.

Neither is your correspondent more happy in the assertion of his own principles than in his misrepresentation of Mr. George's views. He tells us that "a man obtains in England, as in America and elsewhere, just so much for his labor as his labor is worth, according to the law of supply and demand." One illustration from each side of the Atlantic will disprove this assertion. In Wiltshire, England, thousands of acres of excellent land are unculti-

vated, while thousands of half-starved but willing workmen demand an opportunity for growing food for themselves and families. The land remains out of cultivation, and the laborers remain without work, solely because a landlord stands upon the land, and says to every farmer who wants to cultivate it, "You shall not do so unless you pay me six dollars an acre per annum, with an increase in future if I choose to demand it at the expiration of any year." If a working-man comes to the landlord and says to him, "Please let me have five acres of that land, upon which I will work and grow food for my own family and others," the landlord replies, "You shall not have that land unless you pay me fifteen dollars an acre per annum ;" and when the working-man asks why it is proposed to charge him so much more than is charged the farmer, the landlord tells him, "We do not want working-men to have land, lest the farmers should be unable to obtain laborers." Thus the land remains out of cultivation, and the laborer without work and without food, because the landlord stands between demand and supply.

In New Jersey, not far from where I am writing, thousands of acres of land are producing miasma and mosquitos. Thousands of willing hands would drain this land and cover it with houses and manufactories, but in the meantime a landlord's agent stands upon the marsh and demands, in the name of a man who has done nothing, a payment of one thousand dollars or two thousand dollars an acre before he will allow the mosquitos to be suppressed and houses and factories to be erected.

Under these circumstances your correspondent may well say, "I should be glad to learn where in this country, or in any other country on the globe, does a man who has not capital obtain the 'full fruits of his labor'?" True it is that those who have capital and those who can avail

themselves of the unjust privileges which law allows to capital, in connection with the possession of land, are the only persons who can obtain the full fruits of their own or other persons' labor; and if the universality of injustice is a sound reason for upholding it, then undoubtedly Mr. George is in the wrong.

I am willing to admit, as "A Free-born Englishman" contends, that in some respects the agricultural laborer is better off than his brother laborer in the crowded cities of Europe and America; but, gracious heaven! is this a matter for thankfulness? I have had to spend the summer in New York, and with every alleviation that can be provided, my fate has been hard enough; but what must be the condition of families crowded into tenement-houses during the summer heat? No man ought to think of it without a determination to do all in his power to lessen such terrible suffering. And this suffering, in New York and other cities, is the direct and immediate result of landlordism. In London, landlords demand and receive thirty millions of dollars annually from the working-classes, and they are constantly raising their demands. This is the cause of overcrowding. Every month landlords kill more children than Herod destroyed in his lifetime; and yet, as your correspondent reminds us, they are men of excellent character. That they are all honorable men, I do not dispute; but the circumstance does not lessen the fearful consequences of the system of which they are the agents. It is not of abuses that we complain, but of the necessary consequences of landlordism, which, like a huge vise, crushes the masses of the people with more horrible effect at every turn of the screw. Industry, intelligence and invention hold out promises of improvement which seem to be almost within our reach, but before they are obtained the landlord advances his claims and the result is disappointment and misery. If this state of

things continues, it will be the fault, not of the landlords, but of working-men who have the power, and should have the determination, to deliver themselves and their children from a fatal influence. I am,

Yours respectfully,

WILLIAM SAUNDERS.