

CHAPTER VI

THE NEW SERFDOM

ALONG with the enclosure of the land there has gone an increase in tenancy as well as in the size of farm holdings. The free home-owner is diminishing in comparison with the tenant, while the small farm is being overshadowed by the large estate. These movements are already well under way. They characterize the East as well as the West. The rapidity of the change is startling. We are fast becoming a nation of tenants, and from now on the movement will in all probability continue at an accelerated pace.

Conclusive proof of the increase in tenancy appears from the reports of the United States Census. It is evident in agricultural as it is in urban homes. In the year 1880 the number of farms operated by owners was 74.5 per cent. of the total. This was in the midst of the flood tide of Western migration, when the country was recovering from the depression of the previous decade. The homestead law was calling to the West the dispossessed of all the world. Here was land in abundance, which the nation and the states desired only to see appropriated.

By 1890 the number of farms operated by owners had diminished to 71.6 per cent. of the total. During the decade from 1890 to 1900, a decade coincident with another period of industrial depression and recovery, the decline in farm ownership amounted to a rush. By the close of the century the percentage of farm ownership had fallen to 64.7 per cent. of the total.

In the twenty years from 1880 to 1900 cash tenants increased from 8 per cent. to 13.1 per cent. of the total, while share tenants increased from 17.5 per cent. to 22.2 per cent. The increase in the cash tenants was even more marked than the increase in the number of tenants with an interest in the soil.¹

An increase in tenancy may be expected in any growing country. The increase in population makes it inevitable. But that tenancy in America should have increased with such rapidity is startling. And the census enumerators have given the most favorable construction possible to the returns. They have included as "owners" all those who were "part owners" as well as those who were "owners and tenants" and "managers." They have helped the pros-

¹The distribution of farm ownership during these years, according to the census of 1900 (Vol. V, Twelfth Census), is as follows :

Year	Owners	Cash Tenants	Share Tenants
1880	74.5 per cent.	8 per cent.	17.5 per cent.
1890	71.6 per cent.	10 per cent.	18.4 per cent.
1900	64.7 per cent.	13.1 per cent.	22.2 per cent.

perity theory as much as statistical license would permit. For this reason the census showing of farm ownership is much more favorable than the real conditions warrant. For in 1900 only 54.9 per cent. of all the farms were operated by full owners, while 45.1 per cent. were in the hands of tenants, or tenants with some sort of interest or ownership in the soil.

Startling as is the extent of tenancy, the ratio with which it has increased during the past twenty years is far more startling. From 1880 to 1900 the number of farms of all forms of tenure increased from 4,008,907 to 5,739,657, or an increase in farms under cultivation of 1,730,750. The farms operated by owners increased 729,065, or 24.4 per cent.; the farms operated by cash tenants increased from 322,357 to 752,920, a gain of 430,563, or 133.6 per cent.; while the farms operated by share tenants increased from 702,244 to 1,273,366, a gain of 571,122, or 81.3 per cent. The percentage of increase in cash tenancy was five and one-half times the percentage of increase of ownership, while the percentage of increase in share tenancy was nearly three and one-half times as much as the percentage of increase in ownership.

Year by year, and decade by decade, the loss in farm ownership has continued. It is not confined to any one section or to any form of agriculture. The relative number of owners has everywhere de-

creased, while the relative number of tenants has everywhere increased.

When the acreage involved in various kinds of occupancy is considered, the extent in the decline of ownership is even more discouraging. By the close of the century exactly one-half of the acreage of farming land had passed under tenant or qualified owner occupancy. Of the 841,201,546 acres of land under cultivation, 422,354,923 acres were in the hands of "owners." The other half was operated by "tenants," "part owners," or "owners and tenants," and "managers." And even if we include as "owned" all farms except those operated by cash and share tenants, the area of the lands cultivated by pure tenants amounted to 195,072,457 acres, representing a value of \$4,750,888,795.¹

This decline in the percentage of home-owners is just beginning. The next generation will see an even more rapid change in this direction. The growth of population will, of itself, produce this result. For the area of America cannot be increased. The exactions of the railways, of the meat-packers, of the elevators, the warehousemen, and stock yards will promote the tendency still more. A period of hard times, involving an increase in mortgage indebtedness, will still further stimulate it, so that from this time on a relative decrease of farm ownership may be expected.

¹Twelfth Census, Vol. V.

This growth of tenancy has been accompanied with a steady increase in the size of farms. During the fifty years from 1850 to 1900 the farm land under cultivation increased from 293,560,614 to 841,201,546 acres. The census enumerators have claimed that the statistics indicated a decrease in the size of farms in recent years. But comparisons have been made with the returns of the year 1850 before the West was opened up to settlement. If we take the census of 1880 for comparison, it appears that the average size of farms has increased from 133.7 acres in 1880, to 146.6 acres in 1900. And while something more than one-half of the total number of farms are still under 100 acres in extent, it is the total acreage held in large and small farms that indicates the tendency. Of the total area under cultivation, 200,324,045 acres, or one-fourth of the total, are in farms of 1,000 acres and over. In twenty years' time the number of farms in this class has increased from 28,578 to 47,276, while the average size of these farms of over 1,000 acres is now 4,237 acres. In other words, twenty-five per cent. of the farm acreage of America is held by the insignificant fraction of .0006 of the people. There can be but little comfort in a division of the continent under which less than 50,000 persons own 200,000,000 acres, an area far greater than that of either France or Germany, and almost exactly equal to the combined acreage

of Germany and the United Kingdom, with their population of 100,000,000 souls.¹

Upon this imperial domain, a hierarchy of owners and laborers, of landlords and of tenants, has arisen not unlike the feudal order. Had an intelligent foresight guided the distribution of the public land, from ten to twenty million people might have been homed on this area with farms of fifty acres each. Twice that number could have produced a more comfortable living than many city workers now enjoy. Towns and cities would have arisen and industries would have been called into existence employing millions of other workers. There would have been social and political freedom, for freedom is always stimulated by home ownership.

It has been suggested that this increase in tenancy may be a good rather than a bad thing. Tenancy, it is claimed, may mean that the wage-earner is being called back from the city to the country; that the blacks of the South are taking up small patches of ground formerly worked on the plantation system, and that farmers who have acquired a competence are leaving the country for the cities, the better to

¹ In addition to these great estates the Census of 1900 shows that 103,289,564 acres are held in farms whose average size is 210.8 acres; 129,686,228 acres are held in farms whose average size is 343.1 acres, and 67,878,349 acres held in farms whose average size is 661.9 acres. Taking the country as a whole 501,186,000 acres are in farms whose average size exceeded 200 acres. Only 340,000,000 acres of the 841,201,546 acres under cultivation were in farms of less size than the homesteads allotted by the government.

educate their children, or to pass the declining years of their life in comfort.¹

That the negro should be his own hand rather than another's; that the farmer should go to the city to educate his children; that the wage-earner should leave the shop for the fuller opportunity of the countryside—that all these changes may make for economic improvement and well-being of these classes is true. But that tenancy on the part of the farm hand, the wage-earner, or the negro is a good thing for any one but for him who partakes of another man's labor, it is difficult to believe. For that is what tenancy means. It always means that some one must labor in order that another may be idle. And the more industrious the tenant, the greater the productivity of his labor, the greater the demand for land by those out of work, the higher will

¹This is suggested by the Director of the Census. Commenting on the increase in tenancy which the last census indicated, he said: "A change of the same essential character took place between 1880 and 1890 in each of the five geographic divisions. The relative number of owners everywhere decreased and that of cash and share tenants increased, the share tenants in a less degree than the cash tenants. The change in this character which took place in the decade 1880 to 1890 attracted great attention. It was taken for granted almost universally that the number of tenants was increasing at the expense of the number of the owners, and that the movement expressed by the increase of tenancy was an ill omen for the republic. That there is another way of viewing the changes here recorded, and that in some respects the popular conclusion overlooks some very important social facts, is evidenced by the point brought out in the discussion of the facts of Tables LXV and LXVI that the farms operated by owners have increased faster since 1850 than the agricultural population. Such an increase can only be pos-

be the rent which must be paid. This is inevitable. It is the testimony of all experience. Tenancy always means labor for privilege, economic subordination for freedom. It can mean nothing else.

Thus far we have been discussing farm tenancy only. The growth of tenancy is even more marked in urban communities than in the country. In the larger cities the home-owner is rapidly disappearing. Taking the country as a whole, and including urban as well as agricultural homes, only 4,739,914 of the 16,006,437 homes, or 29 per cent. of the total, are owned by their occupiers free from encumbrance, while considerably less than half hold title-deeds at all.¹ In the Eastern cities tenancy is all but universal. In New York city the hired homes amount to 87.9 per cent. of the total. In the boroughs of Manhattan and the Bronx the percentage of tenants rises to 94.1 per cent. In the cities of Bos-

sible provided the increase in the number of tenants has been by the elevation of former wage employees to the position of farm tenants. Such an increase in the number of tenants has been by recruits from the ranks of wage employees, and not from farm owners or their children. The class of owners has increased faster than the portion of the families of former owners who have remained on the farms. The same is true of the tenant class. . . . This marked decrease clearly indicates that the gain in the number of farm tenants has been due to recruits drawn from the ranks of wage laborers and not from the ranks of farm owners."—Twelfth Census of the United States, Vol. V, p. lxxvii.

¹ Distribution of homes in the United States in 1900:

Homes owned, free	Homes owned, but mortgaged	Homes rented
4,739,914	2,180,229	8,246,747

—Twelfth Census, Vol. II, p. 662.

ton, Brooklyn, Fall River, Jersey City, and Memphis more than four-fifths of the population live in rented homes. In the city of Buffalo the percentage of homes owned by the occupiers free from mortgage fell from 21.1 per cent. in 1880 to 15.8 per cent. in 1900. In Milwaukee a similar loss is shown, while in St. Paul, one of the new cities of the West, the loss in mortgage-free homes was 25 per cent. in the decade. Speaking generally, there was a larger proportion of homes encumbered in 1900 than in 1890. In Manhattan Borough out of 383,726 homes only 15,361 were owned by their occupants; while of these only 6,305 are owned by the occupants free from mortgage or other encumbrance. Taking the tenure of thirty-eight leading cities of the United States, we find the distribution to be as follows:

HOMES OWNED, FREE	OWNED, MORTGAGED	RENTED
347,005	306,505	2,259,304

This loss in home ownership is not confined to any one section of the country. It characterizes Massachusetts as well as California; it appears in Kansas as well as in Florida. Out of a total aggregate of 613,659 homes in Massachusetts but 207,579 are owned by their occupiers, and of these only 109,494 are free from encumbrance. The remainder are hired or held subject to mortgage. In Pennsylvania out of 1,320,025 aggregate homes but 328,989 are owned free, or one-fourth of the total. In Kansas, a state

of generous fertility, new conditions, and widely heralded recent prosperity, but one home out of three is owned free, and less than 60 per cent. are owned at all by those who occupy them.¹

As is to be expected, the newer states show a larger percentage of ownership than do the older commonwealths. Free home ownership is lowest in the north Atlantic division of states, being only 22.3 per cent. It rises in the north central division to 35.3 per cent., while the western division shows a still further increase to 42.7 per cent. Free ownership is lowest in New Jersey, the District of Columbia, Massachusetts, and New York. It is highest in the far Western territories, rising to 80.5 per cent. in Alaska, 66.9 per cent. in New Mexico, and but little less in Oklahoma, Idaho, and Utah.

It is apparent that we are rapidly becoming a homeless people, differing only in degree from the tenants of Ireland and England, of Russia and Germany, of Spain and Italy. No constitutions or bills of rights can protect us from the operation of economic laws; no guarantee of personal liberty will

¹The following table of states taken from the Twelfth Census, Vol. II, indicates the conditions of home ownership in 1900:

	Total homes, owned	Total homes, hired	Homes owned, free from encumbrance
Massachusetts	207,579	385,959	109,494
New York	528,152	1,061,267	280,673
Ohio	484,142	437,618	318,553
Nebraska	121,465	92,479	71,617
Kansas	184,150	127,565	117,351
Georgia	130,205	294,830	101,494

avail against the relationship of landlord and tenant so long as the land is subject to private monopoly. Already one-half of the people of America are tenants. The growth of population will increase their number. Future generations will have no alternative but to pay the price which is demanded by those who own the soil. This tribute will increase with each oncoming generation. From now on the father of a family will look forward, not to increasing opportunity for his children, but to an ever-increasing burden to be paid to those who own the land.

This tendency will be further stimulated by other causes. Up to the present time, the franchises of our cities, the financing of railways and transportation agencies, the exploitation of the mineral resources have offered the most inviting fields for capital. Here returns were most immediate. But the transportation agencies have been consolidated, the mining opportunities have been appropriated, the land has been denuded of its forests, and the cities despoiled of their franchises. The development of the future will be in the line of further consolidation or the perfection of operation. Moreover, so long as free land existed in the West, agricultural land was of little value. Rent was slow to rise. Men would not willingly work for another when they could work for themselves. But the virgin prairies are now enclosed. Future generations must find their homes on land already appropri-

ated. This will stimulate agricultural rent. This is already apparent. It has been remarked by the Census Office and the Agricultural Department, which report a tremendous increase in land values in the last few years. The millions of dividends which are pouring into the money centres will now find their way into land speculation. For land is the safest of all investments, and capitalistic agriculture is profitable. Moreover, land has become a monopoly, a monopoly not yet so complete as other industries, but none the less a monopoly. From now on, therefore, we may expect increasing investments in land and a constant growth in the plantation system. This change marks a revolution in the economic foundations of American society. It is the most revolutionary change that could be imagined. For the universal opportunity which for three centuries America offered to all the world has finally come to an end.