

## CHAPTER IX

### THE TYRANNY OF THE DEAD

THE feudal system is not yet ended. No more ended than is the idea of kingship in the countries of Europe. No more ended than is the Church. The feudal *regime* has persisted from the eighteenth century into the twentieth, just as it persisted from the fourteenth century to the fifteenth. It altered its forms in the latter centuries just as it did in the former. The substance has remained the same from the tenth century down to date, only it casts a different shadow. The use of money, the absence of many servile obligations and services, the shifting of the military power from the great nobility to the crown, the substitution of a standing army for personal military service—all these have altered the appearance of the feudal relationship.

But the essence of the feudal system is and ever has been the power of one class to live upon the labor of another class without giving any service in return. The two characteristics of the feudal system have ever been the support of the privileged orders by rent, and the maintenance of the crown by taxes, by the labor of the unprivileged masses. These obligations have ever been the brand of the servile

class. All other elements were non-essential. The personal ties, oaths, and obligations which bound the serf, vassal, and overlord were to feudalism what the Thirty-nine Articles are to the Anglican Church. The rendition of service was its essence. It was the three or five days a week labor on the estates of the lord; it was the payment of toll upon the bridges, of tribute at the markets, at the mill, and the wine-press; it was the beating of the marshes at night in order that the sleep of the lord might not be disturbed by the frogs—it was these things that feudalism meant to the vassal.

Democracy has cast off the shadows of class rule, but has retained the substance. It is as though the government should confiscate such counterfeit coin as fell into its hands, but should solemnly place the hall-mark of its approval on the dies from which it is coined. We have not changed the economic foundations of life, however much we have altered the political forms.

Were it not for the veneration for the past and the respect which property enjoys, we should see that the private ownership of the land and indirect taxation have ever been the agencies of oppression. It is through these means that peoples have ever been kept in subjection. But we refuse to question the things that are. In religion, in law, in politics, progress has to make its way against the generations which are long since dead.

This veneration for the past is always strongest where the property rights of the ruling class are involved. Macaulay has somewhere said that if it were to the interest of an ascendant class to deny the law of gravitation, there would arise an organized resistance to its acceptance. It would be challenged as impious, as contrary to the law of God. It would be treated as at variance with the laws of nature. Those who defended it would be shunned. All preference would be closed against them. They would suffer as did Galileo and Bruno for daring to defend the theory of the revolution of the earth in the face of the opposition of the holy Church.

We fancy we are free from this reverential attitude in America. Yet America is ruled by the political ideas of our grandfathers. The temple of Delphi was scarcely more sacred to the ancient Greeks than the Federal Constitution is to us. Criticism is almost sacrilege. Yet a recent examination of the circumstances surrounding its adoption shows that the Federal Constitution was not intended to be a democratic instrument.<sup>1</sup> It was not designed that the people should rule. The reactionary spirits who had taken small part in the Revolution obtained control of the Constitutional Convention, and impressed their will upon that body. And as later interpreted by the courts the Constitution has be-

<sup>1</sup> *The Spirit of American Government*, J. A. Smith, p. 27.

come even more reactionary than its language imports or its makers designed.

It was this veneration for propertied wrong that continued negro slavery far into the nineteenth century. It was only yesterday that slavery could not be discussed with safety. Even in the Northern states belief in its abolition involved personal violence. In some sections of the country the protective tariff enjoys something of the same sanctity. It may not be discussed in the university, certainly not in the pulpit. The franchise corporations of our cities environ themselves with the same powerful influences, which close the press, the clubs, the legal professions, and every avenue of preferment to those who dare to question the most arrogant demands of their owners. That which was true of slavery, of piracy, and of the gentlemanly pursuit of highway robbery in the generations which are gone, is true of many of the most accepted institutions of to-day.

The lineage of rent is far less honorable than is that of chattel slavery, for slavery has had the approval of almost every nation and of every religion. But the private ownership of the land and the collection of rent for its use is of comparatively recent origin. And, as we have seen, it arose under such conditions as give it a questionable claim upon posterity.

It is true the tenant of to-day does no labor in the fields of his overlord; he is free from physical insult

and molestation; his lands may not be shot over nor his crops destroyed; he need not grind his grain at the mill of the lord, nor do menial services in his household; he is not subject to personal services at every turn, as he was in France prior to the Revolution. All these burdens of a personal sort have been swept away. The methods of payment have been changed, but the servitude remains as it was in the days of the Normans or of the Plantagenets. Rent has taken the place of the spear or the arrow; it has taken the place of personal and military services. The origin of rent is perfectly definite and clear. And to-day, as during the Middle Ages, it is paid by those who labor to those who do not. It is paid by all those who do not participate in the ownership of the land.

We shudder at the inhumanity of the French nobles, who muzzled their serfs in order that they might not eat of the corn which they ground at the mill. We protest against the cruelty of the absentee landlords, who dissipated in idle luxury the exhausting rack-rents wrung from their starving Irish tenants. We sympathize with the peasantry of Russia, and aid by contributions and monster mass-meetings their revolt against the oppression of the aristocracy. Yet the suffering, the hunger, and the oppression which seems so terrible at a distance is not very dissimilar from that which is to be found in America to-day. There is famine in New York and in Chicago, in the mining regions and the mill dis-

tricts of America, just as there is famine in Russia, in Poland, and in Ireland. And the cause is the same in each country. There was food enough in Ireland during the famine. Millions of produce were shipped out of the country to pay rent when the peasantry were dying of hunger by the tens of thousands. There was wealth in abundance for the landlords at a time when there was not even a potato diet for those who produced whatever wealth the country contained. And the infant mortality, which carries away the children of the tenements like a plague, is famine—famine in the midst of plenty, just as it was in Ireland, just as it is in Russia and India to-day. For the steamship and the telegraph have made all the world a counter. There can be no famine among a people who have the means with which to purchase food. And it was not the failure of food, it was the burden of rent which produced the Irish famine of sixty years ago, just as it is the burden of rent which sends 60,000 famished children to school in the metropolis of America every day.

Were it not that our eyes are blinded by this property sense, we should see that the right of the slum owner to his rent had its origin in the days when men were serfs; when society was ruled by force, and legislation had its origin in craft and fraud.

The feudal state still persists in its essential qualities. For the worker in New York still labors two days out of every seven for his overlord in order

that he may be permitted to labor five days for himself. The *corvée* is still exacted as ruthlessly as it was in the eighteenth century. The worker still labors one day more out of every seven in order to support the nation; not only to pay his own taxes, imposts, and octroi on his food, but to pay those of his overlord as well, who escapes their payment just as did the grand seigneur in France.

Measured by its size the tribute of to-day is vastly heavier than it was in the days of the ancient *regime*. It is figured in millions instead of in thousands. It is still paid by the vassal to the lord. It still supports an idle aristocracy in the capitals of the world, just as it did the French nobles at Versailles. The rents of New York run into the hundreds of millions each year. They are paid for the use of the earth, just as they were two or ten centuries ago. And they are collected with far more precision and with much less hazard than at any time in the history of mankind.