

so low as to check further production. Nature (or human labour, whichever way you choose to put it) could at once augment the supply indefinitely if required.

When in any even moderately civilised and progressive country there are people starving, it is never the food that is lacking, but the money to buy it.

The whole doctrine in question rests on the assumption that as population increases there is an increasing difficulty in procuring subsistence.

This assumption we dispute, and we propose to show that it is based on a false inference from the Law of Diminishing Return and a false explanation of the Resort to Inferior Lands.

DIMINISHING RETURN V. DIMINISHING AREA.

But first, Diminishing Return is one thing, Diminishing Area is another, and we must not mix the two together.

Every one sees that if population is to go on increasing, no matter at what rate, a time must come when the world itself would not afford standing-room, much less subsistence. But we need not concern ourselves about that. So long as any country, provided with all the resources of civilisation and peopled by an energetic race, has an appreciable quantity of land of any sort into which a spade can be put, but which yet is uncultivated, it is concerned with the Law of Diminishing Return only, and not with the Law of Diminishing Area. Over and over again it has been shown that if you do but secure to the occupier undisturbed possession and the fruit of his labour, he will not only bring a full and sufficient subsistence from the most barren soil, but convert it into a fruitful garden and cover it with improvements. A time may

come when the Law of Diminishing Area must be faced, but it will not be for generations yet to come, and the Malthusian doctrine professes to concern us now and always.

There are two possibilities, both within view (so to speak) though not yet within touch, either of which would push the scarcity of subsistence difficulty clean out of sight.

One rests upon the fact that all subsistence is composed of oxygen, hydrogen, carbon and nitrogen, that the first three are procurable for the soil in any quantity without difficulty, while the fourth constitutes $\frac{4}{5}$ of the air all round us, but which we have not yet been able to "fix." But this "fixing" is a mere chemical process which nature performs constantly, but of which we have not yet learned the secret. Given certain conditions and nitrogen "fixes" itself. What we have to do is to ascertain those conditions. Imagine the crops that may be grown (with a few things added, already easily procurable) from the poorest soil when we have made this discovery! and it is one that may be made any day.

The other possibility rests on the fact that the conversion of the free elements into food products *direct* is also a mere chemical process which nature performs daily on the widest scale. There is no reason for doubting that what is now done daily for us in the field, may be done by us in the laboratory and later in the factory. Indeed, the first faint beginnings of the process have already been made.

Either of these discoveries (neither of which are a bit more unlikely than any other discovery now being taught, but not yet made) would relegate the scarcity of subsistence difficulty to a period so remote that no reasonable and practical person would concern himself about it.

But since to the ordinary mind a thing that man has often tried, but failed to do, is generally relegated to the impossibilities which only fools would ever expect to see done, this next consideration may have more weight.

No one, I think, will question that the greatest, most wonderful and most useful discoveries are the altogether unexpected, apparently impossible and almost inconceivable beforehand.

The wonders of electricity, photography, spectrum analysis, and a host of others, were never even imagined till they were discovered, and were received with incredulity even then.

The race that has learned how to send a message a thousand miles in a second, to see through closed doors, to transmit waves of force through stone walls and mountains, to take instantaneous pictures by sunlight, to reduce the most complex substances to their primitive elements, to weigh the moon, to find the distance of the sun, to ascertain in what direction an apparently fixed star is moving, may safely be trusted to find food for itself from the as yet uncultivated millions of acres, with ever improving methods and appliances, *once the privileged obstructionist is swung out of the way.*

THE LAW OF DIMINISHING RETURN.

The doctrine in regard to this is, that given so much labour applied to land and so much return to that labour, every additional increment of labour procures a less increase. Doubling the labour does not double the produce; and the inference drawn is that there must be an ever-increasing difficulty in procuring subsistence as population increases.

The doctrine is true; the inference is false.

Subsistence depends so largely on cultivation that people have got into the habit of speaking and (unawares) even of reasoning as if the whole process of procuring subsistence consisted in the cultivation of the soil; whereas, as we all know