

Paupers in a Garden of Eden

By David Targ

"Ill fares the land, to hastening
ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates and
men decay;
Princes and lords may flourish,
or may fade—
A breath can make them as a
breath has made;
But a bold peasantry, their
country's pride,
When once destroy'd can never
be supplied."

Oliver Goldsmith wrote these lines long before Bolivia became a sovereign state; nevertheless, the seeds of that South American country's present problems already had been sown when "The Deserted Village" first appeared. "Sweet Auburn, loveliest village of the plain" or the Republic of Bolivia—the description fits one as well as the other.

The "bold peasantry" of Bolivia is no more. In its place, we find a landless class of beings difficult to describe, men who are neither modern proletarians nor free "savages"; a people who are, in effect, strangers in their native land, debased by extreme poverty in a country that produces extraordinary abundance!

Not many weeks ago Bolivia made front page news in the world's press, thanks to the installation of a totalitarian government. Once again a starving people proved easy game for the ambitions of a "strong man." But even "strong men" cannot contravene the laws of nature, as the bloody, revolution-ridden history of Bolivia proves. The problem of poverty is an economic problem, and is not to be solved by force or will.

There was no poverty in Bolivia before the whites arrived. This fact, however, does not lead to the conclusion that "we should give the land back to the Indians" in order to reestablish economically normal conditions. Not at all. The white people brought with them the means for raising the economic standards of the Indians to heights far beyond their dreams; but they also brought traditions which made achievement

This is the first in a series of articles turning the spotlight of Georgist doctrine on the Problem of Poverty, as it exists in various nations of the world today. The title—"Paupers in a Garden of Eden"—is apt in its dramatic implication, for as Mr. Targ shows, the native Bolivians do in truth live in poverty amidst a veritable paradise of plenty. From time to time additional articles treating similarly of the contemporary situations in other nations will appear in *The Freeman*.

of higher standards for the masses altogether impossible.

Archaeologists agree that the Incas who lived in what is now Bolivia had achieved a civilization of a very high order. Their temples and palaces were built of cut stone. They had paved roads, a sign of permanence in their social life and of brisk intercourse among their communities. They manufactured textiles and pottery. They worked in copper. But they accomplished all this under a tradition of communal land.

The demarcation in the economic status of the Bolivian natives is indeed sharp—a continual prosperity before the Spanish conquest, and abject poverty after it.

That economists do not recognize in Bolivia a shining example of the role landlordism plays in the life of a nation is an enigma of the first water. The apparent causal relationship is at least worth a thorough investigation—communal property in land accompanied by prosperity; private ownership of land followed by poverty—but factors, mostly concerned with matters of diplomacy or expediency, do not encourage looking too closely into this aspect. There are too many axes to grind.

So rich is Bolivia in natural resources that even today, after centuries of exploitation by foreigners, a settler in a single season could place himself and his family permanently beyond reach of hunger and cold, or the want of clothing—if he were permitted to work his land.

That a Bolivian should have such an opportunity is too much to expect, the situation being what it is. A system of private land monopoly and the perpetuation of ignorance among the masses impose on Bolivians a state of subjugation quite as complete as that of the Nazis, Fascists or Communists.

Less than ten per cent of the inhabitants of Bolivia are members of the white race. Yet this small minority own almost all the valuable territory, including the vast mining regions abundant with gold, silver, nickel, copper, lead, antimony and one quarter of the world's supply of tin, zinc, bismuth and borax. (How many army divisions would this inexhaustible bonanza be worth to a great power engaged in a modern war?)

Yet this is not all. Bolivia is rich in virgin rubber forests. Medicinal plants grow wild and provide an important source for a wide variety of drugs varying from digitalis to cocaine. The country has been described, aptly, as a "table of silver supported by columns of gold."

Americans are accustomed to think of our country as being practically self-sufficient, yet Bolivia has an even greater diversity of natural resources. To Bolivia, more than to almost any other nation Goldsmith's observation can be applied: "Where wealth accumulates and men decay."

The question persists: "Why should there be starvation amidst plenty?" And the answer given by Bolivia's history and by her contemporary situation is the one which applies so well the whole world round: "Private monopoly of land."

The record is clear. The facts tell their own story.

The inhabitable sections of Bolivia belong almost entirely to the whites who consider work beneath their dignity—thanks to a tradition handed down from the time when land grants (agricultural *encomiendas*) carried with them the right to enslave the Indians. Originally, how-

ever, the aborigines controlled the land through community holdings, and as a matter of fact, there are still some communal lands held by natives. But these serve more as a relic of the past than as a symbol of the present, for even as recently as the Chaco war officials stole large tracts of public and communal land while the natives were at the front and under military control; and certainly the surrender to a totalitarian government does not indicate a reversal of this policy of outright thievery.

The Indian peon lives on the land of his overlord. He is allotted a small plot—as a rule the least productive portion of the estate—for his own use. As a return for this beneficent arrangement he is compelled to work his patron's land for several days a week. A benevolent master will sometimes pay the peon a few cents a day for his labor. But benevolence of this sort by some patrons is often cancelled out by others who exact rent for the land used privately by the peon. The peon is usually required to supply his own tools. He is not permitted to change his master, nor may he acquire land of his own. In addition to toiling on his master's land and his allotted plot, the peon is required to work on roads and serve the village priest. This may not

be chattel slavery such as prevailed among human beings in our country before 1863, but it is certainly equally as unsavory.

American landed estates are puny by comparison with those of Bolivia. In this South American country ten proprietors hold among them no less than 25,000,000 acres in the territory of Colonias. Yet, while Bolivians starve, and nations throughout the world beg for its products, most of this land goes unused! The interests of the individual landholder take precedence over the social needs of mankind—and it must always be so while private monopoly in land is held to be economically and ethically just. The climax of absurdity—from both the economic and ethical point of view—is reached in the case of one individual who "owns" the astounding total of seventeen and one-half million acres of land!

Bolivia's mines are controlled by foreigners who have no interest in the welfare of Bolivians. On the contrary, they prefer subjection and poverty for the natives, rather than freedom and prosperity, for the former means docile workers and low wages, while the latter might very easily upset their monopolistic calculations. It is plain enough that were the original communal ownership traditions restored the natives of Bolivia would be poor subjects for

economic exploitation. Along with the niggardly wage of the native mine worker goes inefficiency that would not be tolerated in the United States; yet it seems to work out more profitably for the operators this way. Obviously it is not the private owners of privileged enterprises who force up standards, but the social milieu in which that enterprise is conducted. In the comparatively free atmosphere of the United States the nation as a whole benefits much more from the country's natural advantages than do the enslaved natives of Bolivia.

Toward what economic fate is Bolivia heading? At the moment she seems to be taking the course of despair and desperation—totalitarianism.

The most recent news despatches from Bolivia at the time of writing reveal a barter arrangement between the Bolivian government and Germany involving an exchange of its mined raw materials for—munitions! It is truly a bitter jest—the people of Bolivia cry out in anguish for the simple necessities of life, and their masters give them, out of the superabundance of their native land, German guns! Perhaps these are being made ready to shoot down the starving natives of some other country and to rob them in turn of their rights to land and a living.