

Man's Labor Lost

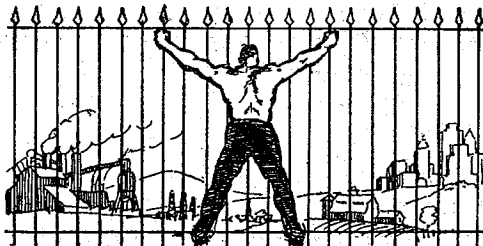
By GEORGE B. BRINGMANN

LANDPOOR:

Impoverished I, who own such spacious fields
Lush in the newborn charity of spring.
Poor pauper I, tho wooded slope and running stream
Are titled my domain,
And records searched—aye, guaranteed,
Bestow an ancient right with all their ancient dust.
How poor am I indeed!
Each warren and each builded nest,
Each beastie, bird and clod of sod
From whence I sit, as far as I can see, are mine—
So says the moulded parchment scroll,
So wrote the dead and royal hand.
Yet here I starve, nay, woefully exist
On parched beans and carrot tops and rice,
And sweeten I weak India tea with hope
That man will pay my price.

YOUTH:

I heard you, sir. Your lands are good to view
And fallow is the look of lower field.
Had I ten kine and two span ox,
Its neighboring meadow would suffice for all.
I'd sow wheat yon on the swell, and plant my corn
In solid rows, and run my melon vines between.
I'd have my hens and gaming cocks and hardy
Yorkshire swine neat penned across the lane.
I'd even have, perhaps, a wife to garden
Beets, and she, her flowers and some eating greens.
But half my dreams and half my plans I speak.
The gambit, sir! What must you have to lease?
So much? I'd barely live. Three parts of every four!
Ah! 'Tis a lovely place to tear my gaze apart.
Am I not young? Cannot I work but harder?
Will your three-fourths strip down to naught my
larder?
Strike you my hand. The bargaining is done.
I'll pay with three so I may keep the one.



Second Year

LANDPOOR:

O pauperish I, who own as far as I can see—
The rolling waves of yellow wheat, the red eared corn.
Here sit poor I, a patient man,
With clabbered cream and scones and sugared rice
and tasty China tea,
Pondering why some neighbors get five from each six
While poor and patient I get from each four but three.

YOUTH:

The harvest's in and hogs are larded well;
Much cheese and grain and multiple beasts now bred.
Two mare, six kine and most the ewes been served.
('Tis comic, sir, that all my hens take such onto
themselves.)
Your portion of the yield shall come to you in season.
'Tis difficult to smoke-cure hams while still attached
to swine.
Already in your fold, the thirty odd of last spring's
lambing
Bleat for the rest a horrid din.



What is it, sir? Are you displeased, or trust not my
accounting?
Or are my labors less than what you dreamed,
Tho more than I had dared?
You speak of neighbors, genteel folk, who get five of
each six.
Aye, aye, and have you seen those who keep the one
remaining—
A sorry, skeletal lot that once were men;
Real laughter foreign to their lips.
You tell me one such came and offered five of six
to you
And that you contemplate a change? This season of
the year!

Am I a dolt? You would take THAT from me for I
 am young
 And I am strong, and five from me is greater than
 from him.
 The five you'll have next fall, and I shall work the
 harder
 For I am young this year. One part of six perhaps
 will fill my larder.



Third Year

LANDPOOR:

O foolish I, with sentiment as soft as dove's warm
 breast.
 Here sit an aged pauperish man.
 I hear today from peddler and from the bailiff's dam
 The genteel folk who last took five of six,
 To furnish Ceylon tea and boxed cakes of leaven,
 Have now decreed quite blithesomely
 Their share is six of seven.
 I'll do the same. Exist on carrot greens and rice,
 Until as surely as the day, a man will meet my price!

Eighth Year

YOUTH:

My Sally was a spry maid once, a laughing brown,
 and merry,
 Her bosom round, and pleasing turned of calf;
 But that's no more, nor unvexed she with problems of
 her own.
 My Sally's ill and aged, and nearing death with cough
 at twenty-four.
 The kine are fat, contented they afield,
 Enjoying more of God's good earth than men;
 While on my back, in crazy twisting gnarl,
 A Bactrian hump bows not by pleasure bent.

A whole half swine, a hundred weight of cheese,
 A sack of corn that's been to mill
 And cherished fruit for holiday desire—
 While others starve and freeze in village streets,
 Considering scraps a feast for prodigal.
 Full lucky I! Have I not seen,
 Have I not oft been told by cleric and my betters
 That heaven's God has favored me amazing,
 Has spared me from the misery abroad,
 And seen to it a human's needs are small?
 Years gone I knew them not as they now prove,
 Far separate from the soul's great blight, "desire";
 My honesty I find the two can tax.
 When joined, they tug the virtue well away.
 Eight years ago—nay, only five, my reckoning was
 level.

This year, if none discover it beneath the cottage floor
 Or hear its grunts and squeals, I'll have an extra shoat
 To breed. She'll farrow piglets, mayhap ten,
 To add to fare that gags with dead monotony.
 But for all that—there's justice,
 And due is due and proper to each man.
 Aye, things are just and daily they improving;
 The freedom of all Englishmen assured.
 I eat and sleep 'neath thatched roof, do have a wife
 and child
 To share with me (e'en hidden muzzled shoat).
 Aye! Aye again! We freeborn fortunates are blessed,
 We loyal hungered Englishmen can VOTE!



HEADSTONE:

"JOHN ROE, AGED 29, SON OF" another "JOHN
 AND MARY" is all the lettering on my face,
 For cutter's tool was limited to space.
 But I who see and hear and very seldom say,
 Observe:
 Here lies a youth, his soul returned to heaven.
 To keep one part he gave full six of seven.
 Unfed by prestige of a crown or virtue of a callot,
 His menu, tho he knew it not, was eating of the ballot.
 So rest his bones beneath this sod;
 He lived on land not owned by God.