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The great-great-grandson of Captain Kidd!: or, How the landlords rob the people.

Author(s): George, Henry

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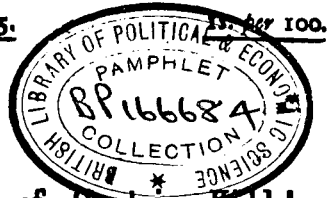
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# The Great-Great-Grandson of Captain Kidd!

OR,

## HOW THE LANDLORDS ROB THE PEOPLE.

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I APOLOGISE to the Irish landlords and to all other landlords for likening them to thieves and robbers. They will, however, understand that I do not consider them as personally worse than other men, but that I am obliged to use such illustrations because no others will fit the case. I am concerned not with individuals, but with the system. What I want to do is, to point out a distinction that in the plea for the vested rights of landowners is ignored—a distinction which arises from the essential difference between land and things which are the produce of human labour, and which is obscured by our habit of classing them all together as property.

The galleys that carried Cæsar to Britain, the accoutrements of his legionaries, the baggage that they carried, the arms that they bore, the buildings that they erected; the scythed chariots of the ancient Britons, the horses that drew them, their wicker boats and wattled houses—where are they now? But the land for which Roman and Briton fought, there it is still. That British soil is yet as fresh and as new as it was in the days of the Romans. Generation after generation has lived on it since, and generation after generation will live on it yet. Now, here is a very great difference. The right to possess and to pass on the ownership of things that in their nature decay and soon cease to be is a very different thing from the right to possess and to pass on the ownership of that which does not decay, but from which each successive generation must live.

To show how this difference between land and such other species of property as are properly styled wealth bears upon the argument for the vested right of landowners, let me illustrate again.

Captain Kidd was a pirate. He made a business of sailing the seas, capturing merchantmen, making their crews walk the plank, and appropriating their goods. In this way he accumulated much wealth.

Let us suppose that Captain Kidd, having established a large, profitable, piratical business, left it to his son, and he to his son, and so on, until his great-great-grandson, who now pursues it, has come to consider it the most natural thing in the world that his ships should roam the sea, capturing peaceful merchantmen, making their crews walk the plank, and bringing home to him much plunder, whereby he is enabled, though he does not work at all, to live in very great luxury, and to look down with contempt upon people who have to work. But at last, let us suppose, the merchants get tired of having their ships sunk and their goods taken, and sailors get tired of trembling for their lives every time a sail lifts above the horizon, and they demand of society that piracy be stopped.

Now, what should society say if Mr. Kidd got indignant, appealed to the doctrine of vested rights, and asserted that society was bound to prevent any interference with the business that he had inherited, and that, if it wanted him to stop, it must buy him out, paying him all that his business was worth—that is to say, at least as much as he could make in twenty years' successful pirating, so that if he stopped pirating, he could still continue to live in luxury off the profits of the merchants and the earnings of the sailors?

What ought society to say to such a claim as this? There will be but one answer. Society should tell Mr. Kidd that his was a business to which the statute of limitations and the doctrine of vested rights did not apply; that because his father, and his grandfather, and his great-great-grandfather pursued the business of capturing ships and making their crews walk the plank, was no reason why he should be permitted to pursue it. Society, we shall all agree, ought to say he would have to stop piracy, and stop it at once, and that without getting a farthing for stopping.

Or supposing it had happened that Mr. Kidd had sold out his piratical business to Smith, Jones, or Robinson, we shall all agree that society ought to say that their purchase of the business gave them no greater right than Mr. Kidd had.

We shall all agree that that is what society *ought* to say. Observe, I do not ask what society *would* say.

For, ridiculous and preposterous as it may appear, I am satisfied that under the circumstances I have supposed, society would not for a long time say what we have agreed it ought to say. Not only would all the Kidds loudly claim that to make them give up their business without full recompense would be a wicked interference with vested rights, but the justice of this claim would at first be assumed as a matter of course by all, or nearly all, the influential classes—the great lawyers, the able journalists, the writers for the magazines, the eloquent clergymen, and the principal professors in the principal universities. Nay, even the merchants and sailors, when they first began to complain, would be so tyrannised and browbeaten by this public opinion, that they would hardly think of more than of buying out the Kidds, and, wherever here and there anyone dared to raise his voice in favour of stopping piracy at once and without compensation, he would only do so under penalty of being stigmatised as a reckless disturber and wicked foe of social order.

If anyone denies this, if anyone says mankind are not such fools, then I appeal to universal history to bear me witness. I appeal to the facts of to-day.

Show me a wrong, no matter how monstrous, that ever yet among any people became ingrafted in the social system, and I will prove to you the truth of what I say.

The majority of men do not think; the majority of men have to expend so much energy in the struggle to make a living that they do not have time to think. The majority of men accept, as a matter of course, whatever is. This is what makes the task of the social reformer so difficult, his path so hard. This is what brings to those who first raise their voices in behalf of a great truth the sneers of the powerful, and the curses of the rabble, ostracism and martyrdom, the robe of derision and the crown of thorns.

Am I not right? Have there not been states of society in which piracy has been considered the most respectable and honourable of pursuits? Does public opinion in Dahomey see anything reprehensible in the custom of sacrificing a thousand or two human beings by way of signalling grand occasions? Are there not states of society in which, in spite of the natural proportions of the sexes, polygamy is considered a matter of course? What would Chinese fashionable society consider more outrageous than to be told that mothers should not be permitted to squeeze their daughters' feet, or Flathead women than being restrained from tying a board on their infants'

skulls? How long has it been since the monstrous doctrine of the divine right of kings was taught through all Christendom?

What is the slave trade but piracy of the worst kind? Yet it is not long since the slave trade was looked upon as a perfectly respectable business, affording as legitimate an opening for the investment of capital and the display of enterprise as any other. The proposition to prohibit it was first looked upon as ridiculous, then as fanatical, then as wicked.

Is it not but yesterday that in the freest and greatest republic on earth, among the people who boast that they lead the very van of civilisation, this doctrine of vested rights was deemed a sufficient justification for all the cruel wrongs of human slavery? Is it not but yesterday, when whoever dared to say that the rights of property did not justly attach to human beings; when whoever dared to deny that human beings could not be rightfully bought and sold like cattle—the husband torn from the wife and the child from the mother; when whoever denied the right of one who had paid his money for him to work or whip his own nigger was looked upon as a wicked assailant of the rights of property? Is it not but yesterday when in the South whoever whisjered such a thought took his life in his hands; when in the North the abolitionist was held by the churches as worse than an infidel, was denounced by the politicians and rotten-egged by the mob? I was born in a Northern State, I have never lived in the South, I am not yet grey; but I well remember, as every American of middle age must remember, how over and over again I have heard all questionings of slavery silenced by the declaration that the negroes were the *property* of their masters, and that to take away a man's slave without payment was as much a crime as to take away his horse without payment. And whoever does not remember that far back, let him look over American literature previous to the war and say whether, if the business of piracy had been a flourishing business, it would have lacked defenders? Let him say whether any proposal to stop the business of piracy without compensating the pirates would not have been denounced at first as a proposal to set aside vested rights?

But I am appealing to other states of society and to times that are past, merely to get my readers, if I can, out of their accustomed ruts of thought. The proof of what I assert about the Kidds and their business is in the thought and speech of to-day. We have in private ownership of land a system which robs the producers of wealth as remorselessly and far more regularly and systematically than the pirate robs the merchantman. Here is a system that steadily condemns thousands to far more lingering and horrible deaths than walking the plank—to death of the mind and death of the soul, as well as death of the body. These things are undisputed. No one denies that Irish pauperism and famine are the direct results of this land system, and no one who will examine the subject, will deny that the chronic pauperism and chronic famine which everywhere mark our civilisation are the results of this system. Yet we are told—nay, it seems to be taken for granted—that this system cannot be abolished without buying off those who profit by it. Was there ever more degrading abasement of the human mind before a fetish? Can we wonder, as we see it, at any perversion of ideas?

Consider: is not the parallel I have drawn a true one? Is it not just as much a perversion of ideas to apply the doctrine of vested rights to property in land, when these are its admitted fruits, as it was to apply it to property in human flesh and blood; as it would be to apply it to the business of piracy? In what does the claim of the Irish landholders differ from that of the hereditary pirate, or the man who has bought out a piratical business? "Because I have inherited or purchased the business of robbing merchantmen," says the pirate, "therefore respect for the rights of property must compel you to let me go on robbing ships and making sailors walk the plank

until you buy me out." "Because we have inherited or purchased the privilege of appropriating to ourselves the lion's share of the produce of labour," says the landlord, "therefore you must continue to let us do it, even though poor wretches shiver with cold and faint with hunger, even though, in their poverty and misery, they are reduced to wallow with the pigs." What is the difference?

This is the point I want to make clearly and distinctly, for it shows a distinction that in current thought is overlooked. Property in land, like property in slaves, is essentially different from property in things that are the result of labour. Rob a man or a people of money, or goods, or cattle, and the robbery is finished there and then. The lapse of time does not, indeed, change wrong into right, but it obliterates the effects of the deed. That is done; it is over; and, unless it be very soon righted, it glides away into the past, with the men who were parties to it, so swiftly that nothing save omniscience can trace its effects; and in attempting to right it we would be in danger of doing fresh wrong. The past is forever beyond us. We can neither punish nor recompense the dead. But rob a people of the land on which they must live, and the robbery is continuous. It is a fresh robbery of every succeeding generation—a new robbery every year and every day; it is like the robbery which condemns to slavery the children of the slave. To apply to it the statute of limitations, to acknowledge for it the title of prescription, is not to condone the past; it is to legalise robbery in the present, to justify it in the future. The indictment which really lies against the Irish landlords is not that their ancestors, or the ancestors of their grantors, robbed the ancestors of the Irish people. That makes no difference. "Let the dead bury their dead." The indictment that truly lies is that here, now in this present year, *they* rob the Irish people. And shall we be told that there can be a vested right to continue such robbery?

*[Reprinted from Henry George's pamphlet, "The Land Question." Price 3d. May be obtained at the Office of the League.]*

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