

## CHAPTER X: The Birthright

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### X THE BIRTHRIGHT

The basis of reform.—The right to live somewhere.—Idle lands, idle hands.—The source of wealth.—An analogy. —Seat and site.—The gain of numbers.—Disease, of course.—Gratitude for woes.

It seems self-evident that any improvement in the condition of the earth must go eventually and mainly to the owners of the earth.

Any improvement, mechanical, agricultural, educational, intellectual, financial, political, social, even moral, anywhere, will make that part of the earth a more desirable place to live and work in, and will consequently raise the rent. The people then must regain their "Right to the Use of the Earth," as Herbert Spencer called it in *Social Statics*; the most gradual and the easiest method is to take the rent of the land instead of taxes, for public use.

Whatever changes we advocate, we must begin with allowing the people to get to the land; we must begin at the beginning; and, indeed, the first principles are laid down in the Hebrew Scriptures as well as anywhere: "in the beginning," they say, God commanded the earth that it should bring forth abundantly to satisfy the desires of every living thing, and then commanded man that he should till the land; and God saw that it was all very good.

Now, when we speak of the land's bringing forth, we do not mean bringing forth merely corn, potatoes, and cattle; nor, when we speak of tilling, do we mean simply plowing and digging. We mean using factory sites, and claybanks, and mines, and coal-pits, and the trees on the hills—all those things used by men that were here before men came, and, that will be here after men have gone, and that economists call land.

If any one had told the Pilgrim Fathers that he was out of work, those staid Puritans would have laughed at him.

They would have said, "Why, clear that field of stones, or plow, or cut fire wood, or dig sand, or mine coal, or burn limestone, or do anything on the land, and we will give you not only ample board and clothes, but big wages." Those same lands are here, mostly still unworked; and, whereas, the fathers were hemmed into a little strip between the Indians and the sea, we have gridironed the whole continent with rail lines and opened up the world with steamship lines. Yet we do not laugh when even a skillful man says he is out of work and in need of all things—because the opportunities for raising food and getting clothing by work are owned and held unused for a further rise in value.

From that land, by labor, by the work of people, comes everything that we want.

Take any ordinary thing. This paper, for instance, came from wood-pulp, made out of the trees which grew wild on the hills and were cut down by the labor of men; they were floated downstream by labor; they were ground up and rolled and bleached by the labor of men. There is nothing whatever in this piece of paper except land and labor, labor of hand or brain.

Even the part of the paper that we know as "the capital employed in making it," the tools, in their turn, came out of the earth; for the iron was taken out of the mine by the labor of men, and was shaped into paper-making machines by the labor of men.

When we realize that everything that we eat, everything that we wear, everything that shelters us, comes out of the land by labor, and out of nothing else, and that man is a land animal, we have the answer to the whole social problem.

For in order that the earth may "satisfy the desire of every living thing," it is necessary that men should get *at* the earth; and when with our system of private ownership we have prevented people from getting at the earth, when we have fenced off the sheep from the pastures, then we have "a social problem."

Man really is "entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"; and, if he is entitled to life, then he is entitled to live somewhere. It can not be right, it can not be the will of God, that any child should be born into the world today with no right to stay in the world at all unless some one will pay a price for the purchase or hire of a place to put its cradle—even to put its little grave. We have taken away the birthright of the child, for the earth was given to *all* the children of men. We have said, "No; it belongs to a few of the children, who may keep it vacant, or charge the rest a fee for its use."

It is necessary, then, not merely "to get the people back to the land," but to get the land back to the people, to restore the birthright, the earth; that it may "bring forth abundantly to satisfy the desire of every living thing."

On the one side we have idle lands; on the other side, idle hands; how could it be otherwise? It necessarily guts somebody out of a job when land which is needed, and should be used, is held unused for the sake of profit. Practically, all land has some speculative value, and consequently there is hardly such a thing as cheap lands; there are low-priced lands, but they all have some speculative value; that is the "land question."

This land question touches every one. The manner in which we shall get all the land into use is hardly worth disputing about now. When men desire equal opportunity for all they will find out how to get it. Here is one way: Suppose that the coal miners are dissatisfied with their wages, and should say, "We are sappers, smiths, drivers, pickers, powder-men, engineers, machinists, carpenters and all the other workers needed to operate the mine; we will leave your pit and go down the road a mile and open up another mine."

The Coal Baron might ask, "Where will you get the necessary capital?" They would answer, "Those who need the coal at \$6.00 a ton, which costs delivered in the town less than \$2.00 a ton,

will give us credit for what little machinery we cannot make ourselves—they will even take their pay in coal."

Then the Coal Baron would answer, "You forget that even so, you can not open up that other mine, for it belongs to us." If now, the miners could answer, " True, but you forget that we have got that coal land, which Mr. Schwab valued at so many thousands of dollars per acre, assessed at its true value, and we will tax it, used or unused, on that basis instead of on the basis of farming land."

Then the Coal Baron would say, "Oh, then, we must hire men to use it, or else we must abandon it, for it does not pay to hold land idle and to pay taxes on its real worth."

There would be an end of the misery of strikes and an end of unemployment.

In every great city there are two large sections which are run, and have always been run, under the sanction of law, on the principle that is called in England "the assessment of ground rent"; and so successfully are they run that those who are working under that plan will laugh at you if you talk of changing it. Those two sections are the theaters and the hotels.

If a man goes to the theater and asks for the best seat, you know that he will pay perhaps a dollar, and he will get a place in the front row. He may go there, and laugh, and roar, and enjoy the play so that it is as much fun to see him as to see the performance; but the price is only a dollar. Or, he may go there, and go to sleep, and even snore; and the price is still a dollar. Or, he may stay away entirely; the price is still a dollar.

Now, for that *seat* the theater-manager charges the full value. What does he do with the proceeds? He provides free light, free heat, free water, free police protection, free protection from fire, and all those things that a theatergoer needs. It isn't according to one's ability to pay that one pays for the support of the theater; it is what the seat one occupies is worth.