

CHAPTER I

THE LURE OF THE LAND

IN the development of America may be seen the development of Western civilization. Here as elsewhere evolution has followed a sequence as orderly as it was inevitable. All Europe as well as all America has been fashioned by the same economic influences and the political, social, and industrial problems of the present day all trace their origins back to beginnings in very early times, while the long migration of peoples, which has finally reached an impassable barrier by the western seas, is but the continuation of a movement which has been in progress since long before the Christian era. As the eminent Italian economist, Achille Loria, says: "America has the key to the historical enigma which Europe has sought for centuries in vain, and the land which has no history reveals luminously the course of universal history."

This is most obvious in the migrations of peoples, migrations which are not confined to those of the barbarian hordes, which swept over the face of Europe in the centuries which followed the dismemberment of the Roman Empire. For the population of the world has been in migration from the beginnings

of recorded history, and so far as Western civilization is concerned the movement has always been away from the east. The centre of civilization shifted from the rivers of Mesopotamia to Egypt and Palestine. Thence it passed on into Greece, where in the fifth and fourth centuries B. C. it gave birth to a philosophy, literature, and art that have remained the inspiration of subsequent centuries. Colonies were settled all about the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Then, as now, men were lured from their ancestral homes by the dreams of new countries where opportunity still was free. Among the colonies so founded was Rome. From the seven hills upon the river Tiber the settlement expanded into a nation, just as, many centuries later, the settlements in Massachusetts and Virginia were the seeds of a new people. Roman arms carried the Roman eagles over the entire peninsula of Italy. In time all Spain, Germany, Africa, and the East acknowledged the dominion of the Republic.

During the first few centuries of the Republic conditions of life were simple in the extreme. The amount of land which the individual could own was limited to what he could cultivate. Substantial equality was thus secured to all. Upon each farm was a citizen soldier who fought for his home and his household gods. Conditions were not dissimilar to those which characterized the first two centuries of the American colonies.

With the expansion of the city of Rome into a nation the government became more complex. Political control passed into the hands of an economic class. It finally centred in the Senate, which represented the moneyed, landed, and creditor class. Immense areas of land were added to the republic by conquest. This land belonged by law to all the people. It was the *ager publicus*, the folk land of the nation. It was not unlike the Northwest Territory acquired from Great Britain by the American colonies. But the members of the aristocracy in control of the government leased this land to themselves at nominal rentals instead of allotting it among the people to whom it belonged. They divided it into great plantation estates, which were used for grazing or were worked by slave labor. As time went on the land was needed for settlement. Population increased and the legions desired a home for themselves and their children, just as did the American colonists after the war with France. But the members of the aristocracy refused to relinquish the land which they had illegally enclosed. They resisted every effort to have the land allotted. They even abolished the nominal rentals which they had agreed to pay the state and assumed the right of absolute private ownership instead.

By these means the aristocracy of Rome acquired possession of nearly all Italy. The free citizens, who had been the nation's strength, were driven to

the city or reduced to slavery by the cruel laws of debt which the senatorial class had enacted. Herein was the beginning of national decay. It seems to have been fearfully rapid in its extension. According to Marcus Philippus "there were not two thousand individuals in the commonwealth who were worth any property" by the second century B. C. When Tiberius Gracchus passed through Tuscany to Numancia he "found the country almost depopulated, there being hardly any free husbandmen or shepherds, but for the most part only barbarians, imported slaves."¹ It was this change, says Mommsen, "which tended most directly to accomplish the material and moral annihilation of the middle classes."² The Roman historian Pliny has testified that "the great estates have ruined Italy."

The small farmer was ruined by debt and taxation. He was unable to compete with slave labor. He was driven to the city or to foreign lands by the monopoly of the land. By this process Italy was almost denuded of free citizens at a time when Roman arms had conquered the world. The Roman freeman was driven from his native soil by the patrician class who had acquired possession of the land of his fathers. It was this that drove him into Gaul, into Spain, into Germany, even into distant Britain.

¹ Plutarch's *Lives*, Tiberius Gracchus.

² *History of Rome*, Vol. I, p. 347.

It was this that peopled Europe with Roman colonists. In time all Europe became crowded, just as Greece and Italy had been many centuries earlier. As population increased, so did the demand for land. It came to have a monopoly value. So long as the land was held by feudal tenure, with the fixed and customary services which feudalism involved, the worker was secure in his holding. He could not be dispossessed by the overlord. Neither his rent nor his services could be increased. The interest of the tenant was the same as that of the lord. They were joint owners of the land.¹ But just as the Roman freeman was driven from Italy by the creation of the *latifundia* or plantation estates, so the freemen of Europe were reduced to poverty by the substitution of money rents for feudal services. Through this change the overlord became the absolute owner of the land. All Europe was divided into private estates, worked by serfs subject to competitive rents. It was this that led to the settlement of America just as it led to the settlement of Europe at an earlier day.

For many centuries the people of England were a nation of home-owners. A part of the land was in individual holdings. A much larger part was held in common by the village. This was modified by the Norman Conquest. The land of England was distributed by the Conqueror among his followers. It

¹ See chapters VIII and IX.

was divided into great estates. The great barons in turn divided it among their vassals. King, lord, vassal, and serf were united by mutual services and mutual obligations. The nexus of all relations was the land. There was little money and no standing army. The state was supported by military and personal services which took the place of rent and taxes. Land was the source of all political and social power. This was the feudal state which existed all over the face of Europe during the middle ages.

The feudal relationship began to disintegrate during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The Black Plague of the fourteenth century hastened it. It reduced the population of England by one-third.¹ The position of classes was changed. Society was revolutionized. The labor supply was so reduced that the villeins abandoned their feudal holdings in order to accept something better. They gave up the land which was theirs by right and under a fixed rent, in order to be wage-earners or leasehold-tenants. Instead of rendering personal services, they now began to pay money rent. Herein was the beginning of the break-up of the old relationship which insured to the tenant a permanent position and at a rent fixed in perpetuity. Through it the mass of the people lost their hold on the land. They became competitive tenants instead of joint owners under

¹ *Six Centuries of Work and Wages*, Thorold Rogers, p. 223.

customary rent. This has profoundly influenced Great Britain. It explains the degraded and impoverished condition of her agricultural population, which, unlike that of many of the farmers of Europe, is but little better than the condition of the casual worker in the towns.¹

For some centuries after the Black Plague rents continued low. Land was cheap because labor was dear. In the fifteenth century land began to rise in value. The Spanish conquest of South America flooded England with gold and silver. This facilitated the change from feudal services to money rents. During the reign of Henry VII the landed aristocracy began to enclose the common lands which comprised

¹The early feudal relationship of lord and vassal, in which the rent of the tenant is fixed and constant, still persists, with some modifications, in certain portions of Europe where custom or tradition has prevented the overlord from assuming the right of absolute ownership in the land. The old relationship is still to be found in parts of Italy, France, and Holland. It also exists in the old French manors on the lower St. Lawrence in Canada, where the farmers still pay a small quit-rent to the seigneurs. Under these tenures the rent remains unchanged from year to year, no matter what the value of the land may be. Speaking of conditions in a particularly favored region of Holland, Mr. Broderick says: "M. de Laveleye's ideal of agricultural felicity in Holland is to be found in the province of Groningen, where much of the land is cultivated under a species of hereditary lease, known as *Beklem-regt*, at a moderate and invariable rent. This system, he (*i. e.*, Laveleye) says, derived from the middle ages, created a class of semi-proprietors, independent, proud, simple, but withal eager for enlightenment, appreciating the advantages of education, practicing husbandry not by blind routine and as a mean occupation, but as a noble profession by which they may acquire wealth, influence, and the consideration of their fellowmen." *Cobden Club Essays, Systems of Land Tenure in Various Countries*, p. 133.

a great part of the area of the nation. There "commenced a struggle of the most fearful character. The nobles cleared their lands, pulled down the houses, and displaced the people. Vagrancy on a most unparalleled scale took place."¹ Henry VIII sequestered the lands of the monasteries, which amounted to one-fourth of the area of the kingdom. He turned their holdings over to favorites who converted them into sheep preserves or raised the rents. This still further increased the poverty of the country and the extent of vagabondage.

The remonstrances of the yeomen and the peasants to Parliament were all to the same effect. They said (1542) of the new landlords: "They cannot be content to let them [the lands] at the old price, but raise them up daily, even to the clouds, so that the poor man that laboreth and toileth upon it is not able to live."

The enhancing of rents, and the enclosing of the land by monopolists, was freely denounced as destroying the commonwealth. The famous sermon of Bishop Latimer before the king in 1549 voiced the protest of the people. "You landlords, you rent raisers, I may say, you step lords, you unnatural lords, you have already too much." For that which before "went for £20 or £40 by the year (which is an honest portion to be had gratis in one lordship of another man's sweat and labor), now it is let for £50

¹ *History of Landholding in England*, Fisher, p. 54.

or £100 by year," so unreasonably are things enhanced. "For whereas have been a great many of householders and inhabitants, there is now but a shepherd and his dog."

By the end of the sixteenth century the bulk of the land of England had passed from the people into great holdings. The new landowners did not want small tenants; it was more profitable to raise sheep. Farmers were driven from their holdings. Vagabondage increased with frightful rapidity. There is a tradition that 72,000 persons were hanged for this offence during two years of Henry VIII's reign. During the sixteenth century the peasants revolted. Land monopoly was the cause of these peasant risings. The remonstrances of the poor who had been driven off their lands by the processes described were met with massacre. From this time on poverty became more and more unmanageable and misery more universal. Hanging having proved impracticable, the Poor Laws of Elizabeth were enacted. Wages were fixed by law. Then followed the enclosure acts. The first was early in the eighteenth century. They continued into the nineteenth. Between 1709 and 1820, 3,387,883 acres of the people's lands were enclosed by the landowners in control of Parliament. This still further impoverished the agricultural population which was dependent upon the commons for pasturage and fuel. Despite the poverty and vagabondage, population increased very

rapidly. According to Thorold Rogers, the population of England doubled during the seventeenth century.¹ This increased still further the competition for the land. Rents rose in consequence, while the enclosure of the common lands and the use of the land for sheep-raising diminished the supply available for cultivation. It was by these processes that the land of England was monopolized. It was this that destroyed the yeomen. It was this that impoverished England.

It was this that led to the settlement of America. Land monopoly drove the Puritan from England in the seventeenth century just as land monopoly drove the Catholic from Ireland two centuries later. The emigration of the present day confirms this. It is only the dispossessed who come. And they come almost exclusively from those countries where land monopoly and competitive rents remain the least impaired. Wherever peasant proprietorship is the rule the population remains at home.

Switzerland, Holland, Denmark, and France are countries of the small proprietor. These countries have added little to our population. It is England, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, and Austria, and now Russia, Italy, and the Baltic provinces, where the land is still held in great estates, that have sent their landless peasants over the face of the earth in search of a new chance, free from the servitude which land

¹*Six Centuries of Work and Wages*, p. 463.

monopoly everywhere involves. It is rarely the well-to-do, rarely the home-owner, rarely, even, the tenant with an interest in the soil who migrates. Men care but little about the form of government under which they live as long as they are industrially free. Neither political nor religious persecution dislodges the property-owning class. So strong is the tie of property, of even a little property, that men suffer every sort of oppression rather than abandon their native homes. It is poverty that drives men to dare the unknown. It is land monopoly that has sent the English colonist to every quarter of the globe. It is this that explains the expansion of Russia into Siberia, of Japan into Korea, and of all Europe into America.

To satisfy one's desires with the minimum of effort is an elemental law to which all nature responds. It is the moving force of all life. All nature follows the line of least resistance. The dumb animals of the forest are blindly guided by this principle which nature has implanted in all animate beings. Life is inconceivable with this motive absent. It underlies every activity; it explains every movement of life. It lies at the bottom of all psychology, as well as of all political economy. To satisfy one's wants in the easiest possible way is as fundamental to biological and social science as the law of gravitation is to physics or the heliocentric theory is to astronomy. In response to this instinct, nations, tribes, and individuals have abandoned ancestral homes to build

their fortunes anew in unknown lands. Inspired by this motive, men have crossed the seas and penetrated into the untouched wilderness—they have braved the Arctic Circle and the jungles of the tropics. For this they have pushed their way into the forests and prairies of the distant West. It was the desire for economic freedom, for the satisfaction of their material wants with a minimum of effort, that lured the Argonauts around Cape Horn and across the deserts during the gold fever of 1849, just as it lured them into the heart of the Yukon during the closing years of the last century.

Free land has been the call to which this blind instinct of man has been attuned. It has been the controlling motive of our life. For three centuries the descendants of the early settlers, together with the incoming immigrants, have responded to this call. The frontier was pushed back along the rivers and over the Alleghany Mountains like a great glacial moraine. It spread out into the north-west territory. Thousands of soldiers were settled by the government. In the closing years of the eighteenth century land companies opened up Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee. New states were carved out of this territory. Long before the Civil War the settler found his way beyond the Mississippi River, inspired as were his father and his father's father, by the desire for opportunity, an opportunity that was offered by the free land upon the frontier.

This movement continued at an accelerated pace during the generation which followed the Civil War. These were years of phenomenal railway development. During the five years to September, 1873, \$1,700,000,000 was expended in railway building. 36,000 miles of line were constructed, more than had been laid in the preceding generation. Much of this development was to the west of the Mississippi. Since that time railway construction has continued, until to-day the total mileage is in excess of 224,000. This is equivalent to an eight-track railway completely encircling the globe. During this period settlement followed the railways, just as formerly it had crept up the rivers, or followed the great lakes or wagon routes. A free homestead of 160 acres was a mirage of hope. It was the voice of opportunity calling to the pioneer. It depopulated Ireland. It brought to our shores the most adventurous spirits of Europe. It converted the hills of New England into a region of deserted farms. More recently it has lured the college men of the East to the prairie states and mining camps. The frontier has been pushed on and still further on. Population has crossed the broad arid belt which, up to a few years ago, was known as "the Great American Desert." It reached and crossed the Rocky Mountains, in the face of the declaration of Thomas Benton that at these mountains "the western limits of the Republic should be drawn, and the statue of the fabled god,

Terminus, should be raised to the highest peak, never to be thrown down."

America has repeated the history of other nations. The desire to be free, to satisfy one's desires with the minimum of effort, has filled in the open spaces of America and is now spilling our surplus population over into Canada and Mexico.

At last the waves of population have broken on the Pacific slope. But that the hunger for land is as intense as ever is demonstrated whenever an Indian reservation is opened up to settlement. Upon the borders of these reservations, tens of thousands of persons gather, impatiently awaiting the signal to enter and take possession of the promised land. Like an avalanche they pour in upon the opened territory, conscious that the few remaining acres of our once apparently inexhaustible domain are being fenced in forever.

The West is now enclosed. The world-long drift of peoples has finally come to an end. It has reached an impassable barrier in the Pacific Ocean. The free land of the nation has been taken up. There is now no homestead to be had for the asking. The frontier has only a historical significance. The public domain is almost wholly gone. "The public lands which now remain are chiefly arid in character," says the Public Land Commission.¹ The opportunity for a home, which for three centuries has been

¹ Senate Document No. 188, 58th Congress, 3d session, p. 3.

open to all, has been finally closed by occupancy or fraudulently appropriated by individuals and corporations in collusion with the government. No longer is America the commons of the world. The steady stream of home-seekers which for three centuries drifted across the face of the continent, has ceased to pass our doors.

This enclosure of the American West, for three centuries the *ager publicus* of the world, terminated the greatest single movement of modern history. It marks the close of the first real cycle of American life, a cycle which has been repeating itself, at various epochs in the history of the world, from the dawn of Western civilization. In a big perspective, it may be likened to the fall of Rome, the opening up of a new route to India by Vasco da Gama, or the discovery of America by Columbus. In so far as it affects America, it marks the end of an era. In so far as it brings to an end twenty centuries of westward migration, it is revolutionary. It marks a turning-point in the world.