

Jones' Itemized Rent Bill

IT was a curious experience of Mr. Smith's. I do not know what you would have done under the same circumstances. Perhaps you are sufficiently well informed to have met the emergency with an easy solution. And in that case you would be better informed than one out of a thousand landlords.

Custom is a wonderful thing. It is so easy to become habituated to almost anything. Give an institution or custom the weight of authority, let it run for a length of years, and though it be grossly immoral or violative of the simplest precepts of justice by which we judge ordinary matters, it will become a fixed habit which even to question is to render oneself an outlaw of society. Slavery was such an institution; kingship largely is. And there are others.

Mr. Smith was a landlord, and purely conventional. So when he received the following letter from one of his tenants, Mr. Jones, he read it with a good deal of mystification.

DEAR MR. SMITH:

For some time I have paid you sixty dollars a month for the house I occupy. I am now in doubt what it is I pay for. I know I pay all the taxes which are included in the rent, and am perfectly satisfied to pay you for the use of the lumber, iron, steel, etc., etc., which I am using and which constitute the house. I am also content to pay you for the insurance and repairs, which are included in the rent. But all this is little more than half the rent I pay. I suppose the remainder is paid for the use of the land on which the house stands. But this is what is bothering me. Land is worth nothing in itself. The same piece of land in a desert would not be worth a song. If located in Wall street it would be worth a hundred times more than it is here.

If I could take the land where I might like to take it, say on the banks of the Hudson where I should like to live this Summer, it would be worth much less than where it is. But if I am paying for something, why should I not have the power to take it where it would be of the most use to me? That, however, is another matter.

But it adds somewhat to my perplexity. For if I could really carry this piece of land around with me, yet must I continue to pay you for it. If I settled now here, now there, as I might prefer, I must continue to pay you now less, now more. So I am in doubt of what it is I am paying for.

As a landlord you know your business. You know the nature of what you are selling, or renting me by the month. No man goes into business without such knowledge, of course.

I am enclosing \$30 for the use of the house for this month, and will trouble you for a carefully itemized bill of the other half before remitting.

Respectfully,

HARRY JONES.

Mr. Smith was plainly bewildered—even as much as Mr. Jones. His first resort was to visit his collecting agent. That individual read the letter and threw it aside contemptuously. "Throw him to hell out," he said. "The man's a nut. The rent of the house is sixty dollars, which he agreed to pay. Who ever heard of an itemized rent bill? Isn't he getting what he bargained for? Serve him a dispossess notice at once."

"I do not wish to do anything summarily," said Mr. Smith. "Jones has been a good tenant. For years he has paid his rent and always promptly. And he's not a crank. Is there

not some way to conform to his wishes?"

"There ain't. He couldn't use the house without the land, could he, and he agreed to pay sixty dollars for the house. There are tenants galore, and you don't have to meet the crazy whim of a tenant these days. I can get twenty dollars more for that house to-morrow."

"I do not want you to do anything until you hear from me," said Mr. Smith, as he left the office. Plainly the agent had no solution.

It occurred to him that there was one who might help him in his difficulty. Smith had been to college; he had studied Political Economy under a professor named Dubbs. Of course, he didn't remember anything of what he had "learned." There was, however, a vague recollection in his mind of certain phrases learnedly pronounced, fee simple, hereditaments, immovable appurtenances, margin of cultivation, Ricardian law of rent, etc., etc. These had long ceased to mean anything to him, if they ever had.

But he sought out Professor Dubbs in his study, and that learned individual donned his glasses. He knew almost everything that persons of common sense had agreed to forget.

"The man's difficulty is absurd," he said. "Plainly he lacks a college education. Rent is payment for the indestructible qualities of the soil. Payment for land is not merely a legal convenience, without which the whole structure of society would fall, but is part of the essential nature of things. Land in a state of nature becomes property by successive gradations of improvement that fit it for habitation and occupation. Payment for land is due the generations of landowners who labor to sequester it from the destroying inroads of nature, to render it productive for others, and to establish that security of possession without which man would revert again to the condition of the nomad. On this institution all civilization rests; even to question it is to imperil its stability. It is also (this with a patronizing smile) to leave oneself open to the suspicion of Bolshevik tendencies."

Mr. Smith left Prof. Dubbs much perplexed. The brief lecture delivered with labored pomposity was not conclusive. Mr. Smith was conventional, as we have said, but he had an honest mind and within bounds could reason straight. Besides he didn't like Dubbs' air of superiority. Perhaps there was something to be said on the other side. Perhaps the difficulty was real. The fact that Jones had asked a question which Smith could not answer made further consideration advisable.

Then Smith bethought him of an old friend, a book lover, almost a crank on the investigation of a dozen subjects. This man he had known as a student of affairs. There was little in common between them but a warm friendship that dated from boyhood. He had done this man some favors, so had no hesitation in soliciting a favor in return. Beverly James, student, lecturer and expert on a variety of subjects, should be his last resort. Him he sought in his perplexity.

"He wants an itemized bill for half the rent, does he? He agrees to fully recompense you for the use of your timbers, iron, steel, etc., which form the house, as well as the

insurance, and the taxes. The remaining \$30 must be itemized. He's very nearly correct, for the house is about equal in value to the land, according to the assessments, which are pretty nearly up to par value in that neighborhood.

"Very well. Now, Smith, let us study the map," saying which Mr. Beverly James spread before him on his reading desk a map which he extracted from one of the pigeonholes.

"Let us study the locality. Of course, there is a good system of sewerage. As he wants an itemized bill, put down \$3 for that. It is just as well to begin at the beginning."

"But," said Mr. Smith, "the city supplies that."

"Yes, and you charge him for it. You may not have thought of this, but it is true. If there were no sewerage you could not get that much rent from him. Is that not so?"

"Yes, I suppose so. It looks like it, anyhow."

"Now here is a school two blocks away. Jones has three children. Put down \$3 for the School."

"But there is a school tax," interposed Mr. Smith.

"There is, but observe that Jones pays this in the first \$30. You don't pay it. He pays it twice. \$3 for the school and \$3 due for the land value due to the presence of the school. Put down \$3 for the Pavement and \$3 for the Sidewalk. And now \$3 for the Fire Department. The house needs a fire department, but observe that it is not the house the value of which is increased by the very efficient Fire Department of this city, but only the land. After collecting the tax from Jones you now collect the land value due to the presence of the Fire Department. You see you really pay no taxes for these things at all.

"But here we come to something that the city does not provide. This little dot on the map is a theater situated just eight blocks away—a very beautiful playhouse. Put down \$3 for that. Jones is a regular attendant and spends no carfare to convey himself and his family to the theater. The carfare which he saves you collect in rent. If the street railroad company got it, you couldn't."

"Do you really mean that?" queried Smith, wonderingly.

"Nothing surer, old top. But here is something else. 'Southern exposure,'

"Ah, those dear old words familiar in real estate ads. Put down \$1 for Southern Exposure. Now there is a Public Library five blocks away. All the Jones family are great readers. Put down \$1 for the Public Library. There is a church opposite the house. Jones doesn't go to church much, but a church improves a neighborhood and adds something to residential desirability. Put down \$1 for the Church."

"The street is a quiet one. I'm afraid you'll have to put down \$1 for Quiet spelt large. Ah, but here is another spot on the map. Prospect Park only a block away! There the children go in the afternoon. Well, we'll have to put down \$2 for the Park.

"Then there is a delightful breeze in Summer that comes in at the windows. Put down \$2 for 'Summer Breezes.' Then there is the absence of bad smells. You see you charge Jones for things absent as well as things present. Lump these at \$3.

"Then there is a little item which I had almost over-

looked. The land on which the house stands is near enough to the park to hear the twitterings of the birds in the trees. It is very pleasant to wake in the morning with songs of birds sounding musically in the ears. So put down \$1 for Twitterings of Birds in Trees."

"But this is absurd," said Smith, testily.

"Not at all absurd. Certainly it is what you are charging Jones for. I have been careful to calculate as I went along in order to get the \$30. I know I have not figured everything and something might have to be taken away from some items and added to others. Perhaps I haven't mentioned a lot of things for which you are charging Jones, a fine drug store two blocks away, a number of excellent stores, and easy access to the down-town shopping district.

But here is your bill. Look it over. It's all land value, from Sewerage to the Songs of Birds. You are charging Jones for all of these things. That you can't charge him for moonlight and starlight is because these are more widely distributed, and Jones sleeps at night anyway. Don't you see, old man, you are getting money under false pretenses. No wonder Jones woke up and wants an accounting."

"What is the pretense?" asked Smith, now somewhat vexed at his friend.

"Why, seriously, the Great Pretense is that you have a right to charge Jones for what Society does and even what God does. If men build theaters and public libraries you collect from Jones. If God grows trees and causes birds to sing in the branches you mulct Jones. You even tax Jones for a house of worship across the street, though Jones is a disciple of Thomas Paine. But examine the bill. Here it is."

And Smith took up the following bill:

To HARRY JONES, Dr.

FOR RENT OR LAND VALUE AS ITEMIZED:

Sewerage.....	\$3.00
School.....	3.00
Fire Department.....	3.00
Sidewalks.....	3.00
Street Pavement.....	3.00
Theater (proximity).....	3.00
Southern Exposure.....	1.00
Public Library (proximity).....	1.00
Church (proximity).....	1.00
Quiet.....	1.00
Prospect Park (proximity).....	2.00
Southern Breezes.....	2.00
Absence of Bad Smells (olfactory advantages)...	3.00
Twittering of Birds.....	1.00

\$30.00*

*There is but one defect with these figures. They do not measure the present rent for a house so situated by one half. We started with a certain rental, but as the list of location advantages grew we saw the land value constantly rising and Jones' rent increasing: it was then too much trouble to change it, since it could not be altered without altering the other figures. The reader, therefore, will make his own calculation based upon present day rentals for a house having these location advantages. As a matter of fact, a single apartment in a flat so favored would command double the rental paid by Jones.

Mr. Smith left his friend, plainly bewildered. It was clear that in the sum agreed to by Jones, the cheque for which rested in his pocket, were included all the taxes paid to the city. Yet it was clear, too, that he was charging twice over for these items. For in the itemized bill drawn up by his ingenious friend these charges stared him in the face.

A second visit to his collecting agent called forth a smile from that person which developed into a loud guffaw when Smith laid the itemized bill upon his desk.

"Well, what do you say to it?" asked Smith.

"Just this," said his collecting agent. "It's all so. These are all items properly charged to Jones. Whether you have a right to payment for these things, we won't argue. In theory the bill is all right. But, my dear Smith, we live in a practical world. You need the money. That's the answer."

And Smith left, wondering if that really was the answer.

JOSEPH DANA MILLER.

The Class Conflict and Revolution

ANY inquiry into the desirability of radical economic reforms ought to involve, as a first step, a consideration of the nature of the economic system in and through which the people of the modern world carry on their struggle for the means of existence. For unless we suppose this system to be the best possible, it ought clearly to be either modified in greater or less degree or superseded. And whether either sort of change ought to be brought about by any proposed method, can hardly be intelligently decided without an understanding of the fundamental nature of the system of which the modification or supersession is contemplated.

It is the failure clearly to comprehend the nature of the faults of the existing economic system which has, in large part, made protest and even revolt ordinarily so futile in really improving the conditions of life for the common man to the extent that might else be possible. Protestant or revolutionary groups have to meet, always, the more or less solid opposition of the groups whose interests are threatened by change and who know well how to protect these interests.

Individual members of the conservative groups may be liberal-minded enough to favor reforms of a palliative sort, especially as many of these reforms seem likely to cost them nothing. But few members of the conservative, property-owning class seem able to contemplate without a sense of shock or a feeling of indignation any proposal seriously to disturb in its fundamentals that order or system of things—the existing system of private property—in the meshes of which they have been bred and to which they seem mainly to owe their material well-being. To the support of this system in general they will usually rally. We need not suppose that they understand it in the sense of being able to contemplate philosophically its faults and its virtues.

But they are not devoid of an understanding of how it works to maintain them and of how to make the most, in argument, of certain of its apparent advantages.

Reputable economists in plenty (not all economists, however) are at hand to support them and to make plausible by manifold arguments of ingenious intricacy the claim that the present scheme of things is good for the masses and that, anyway, the views of those who attack it are associated with this or that "now generally discredited" doctrine and so "fall to the ground" and "need not be further considered." Young economists not infrequently get the impression from their teachers that certain views are commonly rejected by reputable members of the craft, and deem it not worth while to investigate them. Subconsciously they come to feel that these views would be likely to put them "outside the pale."

A task more difficult than that of the defenders of the present system confronts those iconoclastic dissentients who must, to be successful, get another system put in its place. These dissentients have to rally the elements of discontent, of which, presumably, they are a part, to the support of a more or less definite programme. But these elements of discontent are more or less composed of the relatively untrained masses; hence they are even less likely than the sufficiently ignorant propertied classes to understand the inner nature of those arrangements which the propertied classes defend and which it appears to be the interest of the masses to attack; and they cannot be expected to have a very intelligent comprehension of the kinds of change needed or of the type of system which may best be substituted for the one we have.

The protesting masses are likely to be attracted by something which sounds radical, which appears to uproot the whole present scheme of things but which, in fact, cannot be made to work successfully in the existing state of human nature. They are too likely to be the prey of the demagogue or the fanatic. With a sense of having been unjustly ground down by an economic system which has made others prosperous, they are likely to favor absolute equality of incomes, regardless of differences in efficiency, or to follow a Marxian philosophy and wish to terminate all incomes from property just because these are not labor incomes. If the propertyless masses succeed in acquiring temporary control through revolution, they are likely to blunder from one radical step to another without adequate regard to those elements of human nature which make some things workable and others not, until the general turmoil and poverty and disorganization discredit them far enough to put their deposed masters back into the economic saddle.

Again, oftentimes a group of the propertied classes is enabled to use the ignorance and discontent of the propertyless as a means of further lining their own pockets even at the expense, partially, of the rest of the propertied classes, as well as at the expense of the masses. Thus, the tariff protected interests of a country, through their organizations and organs, make it appear to millions of workingmen that free traders are aristocratic enemies who would take the bread from their mouths to benefit foreigners, and that