

Right to the Use of the Earth.

(From Chapter IX. "Social Statics.")

BY HERBERT SPENCER.

"Hallo you, sir," cries the cosmopolite to some backwoodsman smoking at the door of his shanty, "by what authority do you take possession of these acres that you have cleared, round which you have put up a stake fence and on which you have built this log house?"

"By what authority? I squatted here because there was no one to say nay—because I was as much at liberty to do so as any other man. Besides, now that I have cut down the wood, and ploughed and cropped the ground, this farm is more mine than yours, or anybody's, and I mean to keep it."

"Ay, so you all say. But I do not see how you have substantiated your claim. When you came here you found the land producing trees—sugar maples, perhaps, or maybe it was covered with prairie grass and wild strawberries. Well, instead of that you made it yield wheat or maize or tobacco. Now, I want to understand how, by exterminating one set of plants, and making the soil bear another set in their place, you have constituted yourself lord of this soil for all succeeding time."

"Oh, those natural products which I destroyed were of little or no use; whereas I caused the earth to bring forth things good for food—things that help to give life and happiness."

"Still you have not shown why such a process makes the portion of the earth you have so modified yours. What is it that you have done? You have turned over the soil to a few inches in depth with a spade or a plough; you have scattered over this prepared surface a few seeds, and you have gathered the fruits which the sun, rain and air helped the soil to produce. Just tell me, if you please, by what magic have these acts made you sole owner of that vast mass of matter, having for its base the surface of your estate, and for its apex the centre of the globe? all of which, it appears, you would monopolise to yourself and your descendants forever."

"Well, if it isn't mine, whose is it? I have dispossessed nobody. When I crossed the Mississippi yonder, I found nothing but the silent woods. If some one else had settled here and made this clearing, he would have had as good a right to the location as I have. I have done nothing but what any other person was at liberty to do had he come before me. While they were unreclaimed these lands belonged to all men—as much to one as to another—and they are now mine simply because I was the first to discover and improve them."

"You say truly when you say that 'while they were unreclaimed these lands belonged to all men.' And it is my duty to tell you that they belong to all men still; and that your 'improvements,' as you call them, cannot vitiate the claims of all men. You may plough and harrow, and sow and reap, you may turn over the soil as often as you like, but all your manipulations will fail to make that soil yours, which was not yours to begin with. Let me put a case. Suppose that in the course of your wanderings you come upon an empty house, which in spite of its dilapidated state takes your fancy; suppose that with the intention of making it your abode you expend much time and trouble in repairing it—that you paint and paper and whitewash, and at considerable cost bring it into a habitable state. Suppose, further, that on some fatal day a stranger is announced, who turns out to be the heir to whom this house has been bequeathed, and that this professed heir is prepared with all the necessary proofs of his identity; what becomes of your improvements? Do they give you a valid title to the house? Do they quash the title of the original claimant?"

"No."

"Neither then do your pioneering operations give you a valid title to this land. Neither do they quash the title of its original claimants—the human race. The world is God's bequest to mankind. All men are joint heirs to it; you are among the number. And because you have taken up your residence on a certain part of it and have subdued, cultivated, beautified that part—improved it as you say—you are not, therefore, warranted in appropriating it as

entirely private property. At least, if you do so, you may at any moment be justly expelled by the lawful owner—Society."

"Well, but surely you would not eject me without making some recompense for the great additional value I have given to this tract by reducing what was a wilderness into fertile fields. You would not turn me adrift and deprive me of all the benefits of those years of toil it has cost me to bring this spot into its present state."

"Of course not; just as in the case of the house, you would have an equitable title to compensation from the proprietor for repairs and new fittings, so the community cannot justly take possession of this estate without paying for all you have done to it. This extra worth which your labour has imparted to it is fairly yours and although you have, without leave, busied yourself in bettering what belongs to the community, yet no doubt the community will duly discharge your claim. But admitting this is quite a different thing from recognising your right to the land itself. It may be true that you are entitled to compensation for the improvements this enclosure has received at your hands; and at the same time it may be equally true that no act, form, proceeding, or economy can make this enclosure your private property."

Councillor H. S. Murray at Jedburgh.

THE LAND QUESTION AND THE LABOUR PROBLEM.

We give the following from Mr. Murray's speech at Jedburgh on the 2nd December. The meeting, which was held in the Corn Exchange, was most enthusiastic. Ex-Provost Boyd presided. After referring to the Rating Bill, which he characterised as a piece of scandalous class legislation, Mr. Murray said:—

Some people have a very vague idea of what

THE LAND QUESTION

is. In the political history of the present century feeble discussion has been followed by feeble attempts to make improvements in our land laws, but no comprehensive reforms have been put forward, nor has any real progress been made towards a proper solution of this great question. Our present land system is a disgrace to any civilised nation. (Applause.) We pride ourselves on being the most forward of all nations, and go masquerading all over the world as the pioneers of progress, and of a civilisation in which we wish others to share, while at home we neglect the primary and fundamental conditions of the happiness of the people, viz., a proper system of land tenure. All wealth arises from the application of labour to land. Many people have a very curious notion of what wealth is. They think it consists in money. Now you cannot eat money. (Laughter.) Suppose it suddenly rained down

SOVEREIGNS FROM HEAVEN

and everybody in England, Scotland, and Ireland was able to pick them up from the ground and fill their pockets with them, what the better would you be for that? You could not get any more to eat or drink. You could not get any more clothing to put on, on that account, unless food and clothing rained down from heaven at the same time as the sovereigns. Nature places before us the stern necessity of labour. Food and clothing are only to be obtained by labour, as the first condition, and the raw material from which they are made comes, as I said, from the land. If this be so, in order, therefore, to make a country rich, in order to allow the people to be well provided with all the necessaries and luxuries of life two conditions require to be observed. The first is that every man shall be allowed freedom to use his labour and his faculties for his own advantage, and the second condition is that the

LAND LAWS OF THE COUNTRY

shall be such that the land is used in the interests and for the benefit of the whole people, and not for that of an exclusive and separate class. (Applause.) Now, do we find this to be the case in this country? Do we find that we make the best use of our land? Do we find that it is used in the interests of the whole people? I say we do not. I say that instead of the people's interests and rights being considered, in the use and development of the land, we find it monopolised by a small section of the people who look upon it as a mere rent-producing machine—(applause)—for their own exclusive advantage. Our welfare, as a society, depends upon the recognition of our equal rights to the land. It is, therefore, not surprising when we look round us to find society in such a deplorable state. It is not surprising that the society of to-day is

A MASS OF DISCORDANT ELEMENTS

where injustice and selfishness reign supreme. It is not surprising to find on the one hand some individuals clothed in purple and fine linen, and over-burdened with wealth beyond the dreams of avarice, and on the other a slough of despond where thousands are toiling for a bare subsistence, surrounded by conditions which are a disgrace to civilisation. (Applause.) What are the principles on which we must found our society if we would have it prosper. I remember some little

time ago Lord Rosebery—(applause)—made a magnificent speech in Dumfries on our great National Poet, Robert Burns. (Applause.) He said that Burns bore the banner of the essential equality of man. Now, what did Lord Rosebery mean by

THE ESSENTIAL EQUALITY OF MAN?

He could not mean that all men should be equal in their worldly possessions or that they had equal powers of acquisition. Neither could he mean that all men were equal in their abilities, for that would not be true. What then did he mean? or rather, what does Burns mean when he is described as bearing the banner of the essential equality of man? I can only take it that the only reasonable meaning to be attached to such a proposition is that men are equal in their natural rights. The first right is the right to life, and the second right is the right to that which nature has provided for the support of life, viz., the land. Consequently, I say that any society which is to be based on justice and which is to endure must be founded

UPON EQUALITY OF RIGHT

to the land, and every society which does not recognise this equal right is based upon injustice and cannot endure. How are we to proceed in order to restore to the people their equal rights to the land? The matter is very simple. It merely consists in putting a tax on the rent of the land, which will absorb in time the rental value of the bare land excluding improvements. Let me illustrate. We are here assembled in this Hall which stands on a certain area of ground. Now this ground is very valuable, and even although the Hall itself were lifted completely away, leaving a bare space, the ground would still retain its value. Suppose for the sake of argument that the value of this piece of ground is £1000. The annual or rental value at 4 per cent. would be £40. Now this £40 a year is purely due to the presence and collective efforts of

THE PEOPLE OF JEDBURGH,

and therefore they have a collective or equal right to it. If then you put a tax of £40 a year on this land and take all taxes off the building itself, and if you use this £40 for the benefit of the people of Jedburgh in their collective capacity, you will be giving to them, so far as this piece of land is concerned, their equal rights to the land. If you will apply this principle all over the country and put a tax on all land in proportion to its rental value, you will be restoring to the people of this country their equal rights to the land. Let us now glance at the results of such a measure. The first result would be to raise wages all over the country. The use of the land at present is not determined by the wages it will yield to Labour and Capital, but by the rent it will produce to a given landlord. This tax would force the hand of the landlord—it would force the land into use. Suppose that a tax was put on the land in Roxburghshire, where would the

DUKE OF BUCLEUCH

be? If he did not put the land to its proper use he could not afford to pay the tax. He would then be obliged to clear out—(applause)—and so abandon it to others who would put it to its proper use, and instead of being used merely as a machine to put rent in his pocket it would be used to give employment to the people, and to put wages in their pockets. (Applause.) In consequence of this, agricultural labourers would not be driven off the land into the towns to come and reduce your wages here and raise the price of land here. (Applause.) There are thousands of acres in Roxburghshire which would support thousands of people if they could only get hold of it. But they cannot get hold of it because it is used to produce

RENTS FOR A MONOPOLIST,

such as the Duke of Buccleuch and other men who are by law allowed to usurp the equal rights of the people. After dealing exhaustively with the question of ground rents, Mr. Murray continued—the Liberal Party has a great task before it, it has to fight three great monopolies: the parson, the publican, and the proprietor, are all united in solemn league and covenant together against it. The first wishes to monopolise religion—I beg pardon, I should say the first wishes to monopolise not religion but the funds—(applause)—the National funds, which arise from the official practice of a so-called National religion. The second wishes to monopolise the enormous profits which arise from the privileged sale of drink. The third, without doing any labour himself, wishes to monopolise the results which arise from the industry and labour of other people. These are the forces which are opposed to us. They are strong, but

THEY ARE NOT INVULNERABLE.

and with the enlightenment and enthusiasm of the people they must ultimately be overthrown. The two first really rest upon the third which is the greatest of the three. It again has its roots in injustice and is based upon force, which, with the spread of reason and knowledge cannot possibly endure. A distinguished writer has said—"The darker ages in which force, not reason, regulated the affairs of mankind, have transmitted to every country a vast heritage of error and injustice, which it is the duty of succeeding generations to correct." That this correction can alone come from the Liberal Party, who can deny? Let us then patiently work to that end in the full assurance and confidence, that with justice on our side, our principles shall again become the directing guide in the councils of this great nation. (Loud applause.)

Just About the Same.

Footpad—"I'm a desperate man, and I want money."

Land-grabber—"You vagabond! why don't you work for your money, the same as I do?"

"Same as you do! Well, ain't I trying to?"

"Are you in favour of Taxing Land Values?"