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DAVIDSON, J Momson

“FREE TRADE IN LAND.”

Would it Benefit the People?

“The notion,” says Carlyle, “of selling for certain bits of metal the ‘Iliad of Homer,’ how much more the land of the World Creator, is a ridiculous impossibility.” Yet this ridiculous object is what the recently-constituted Free Land League propose to themselves to attain. The “Great Liberal Party” is just now badly off for a “cry,” and Mr. John Bright and Mr. Arthur Arnold are chiefly responsible for supplying it with one of the worst conceivable. They desire to knock down the land of the World Creator to him who can bid for it the most bits of metal. This news must of all men rejoice the soul of Mr. Winans. The depopulator of the Highlands abounds in bits of metal, and when the Free Land Millennium sets in he will be able to carry on his favourite business of supplanting men by deer to his heart’s content. Free Trade in Land is an excellent trade for those who have accumulated or stolen plenty of bits of metal; but for such as have not—that is to say, for the vast majority of honest poor—it is simply a mockery and a snare. Did the institution of Slavery in the Southern States benefit the “Mean Whites” with empty purses, who could not so much as invest in a single Slave? On the contrary, it degraded them far below the level of the corresponding class in the Northern States. Now, Free Trade in Slaves and Free Trade in Land are perfectly analogous institutions, and it is doubtful if the evil effects of the latter are not even more far-reaching than those of the former. Both are contrivances by which the few are enabled to rob the many of the fruits of their industry. The private ownership of land clothes one man with the power of depriving his fellows of shelter, food, and raiment. It invests the few with a life and death control over the many.

Now, it is easy to see that Free Trade in Land is as false an application of the Free Trade theory as was Free Trade in the bones and blood of factory women and children. Free Trade in commodities that can practically be supplied without limit has unquestionably been an immense boon to this country; but it does not at all follow that Free Trade in an element which no human ingenuity can augment by a single atom would be similarly beneficial. On the contrary, if the soil of England, like its manufactures, is to be brought within the grasp of the great capitalists, undivided power will be delivered over to the already too powerful upper middle class, and then woe betide the workers! The yoke of the capitalist will be more complete, and assuredly it will be none the less heavy than that of the feudalist. The evil of “unearned increment” is as great in Broadway, New York, or in Bourke Street, Melbourne, as it is in the City of London. Free Trade in a natural monopoly like the land is simply a contradiction in terms—“a ridiculous impossibility.” Carlyle saw the absurdity at a glance; but then he was a genius, whereas the Free Land Leaguers are at the best but a superior order of bagmen. In its very essence land can neither be purchased nor mortgaged. It is common property, and the community which parts with it to individuals voluntarily is a community of imbeciles, and the community which parts with it involuntarily is a community of cowards.

But if our Free Land Leaguers have misapplied the Free Trade theory, they have still more notoriously misinterpreted Free Trade in Land facts. They go to the sparsely-populated United States and the Colonies for their illustrations; whereas densely-peopled England can only be compared with herself or some country similarly situated. In the United States there are still many, many millions of acres to homestead and pre-empt, and till they are

all taken up the inherent evils of Free Trade in Land cannot be expected to show themselves in anything like their natural proportions. Men do not buy land which they can get for next to nothing. But even in the United States, the farmers—the most splendid yeomanry that ever existed—are beginning to discover to what Free Trade in Land inevitably leads. Very many American farms are covered by mortgages on which interest is paid worthy of the experiences of the Egyptian fellaheen. Recently the *New York Times*—a perfectly temperate authority—warned the American farmers of their fate. They were destined to become like the rack-rented tenant farmers of England! Nay, their final condition will probably be worse. One had much better pay rent to a feudal landlord, bound to his tenantry by many traditional ties, than be fleeced by a remorseless money-lending Shylock, moved by considerations of filthy lucre alone.

And there are other still more alarming symptoms. A phenomenon is appearing in some of the Western States which is comparable only with that which heralded the fall of ancient Rome. Rome conquered the world by the swords of her four-acre yeomanry. But Rome, like the United States, was a Free Trade in Land State; and her yeomanry eventually either fell hopelessly into the grasp of the usurer, or succumbed to the expropriating capitalist. Then Italy was tilled, so far as it was tilled, by immense gangs of homeless slaves, and the end was not far. Now, an American Bonanza Farm is as like a Roman slave estate as can well be imagined. The Bonanza Farms of Minnesota, Dakota, Texas, Kansas, and California each contain thousands of acres owned by Presidents and Directors of railways, by bankers in St. Paul, New York, London, and Frankfort-on-the-Main. They are "run" on purely capitalist principles. There is neither woman, child, nor home. The men work thirteen hours daily. They receive from 8 dols. to 16 dols. per month, according to the season. In the neighbourhood of these Bonanzas the small farmers are hopelessly in debt. They have generally to pay 50 per cent. more than the Bonanzas for the conveyance of their produce, and 33 per cent. more for their farming implements. How Mr. Jesse Collings's peasant proprietors are to stand up against capitalist farming it is hard to see. In a very instructive article on "Bonanza Farms" in the *Atlantic Monthly* for January, 1880, the concluding sentence is this:—"We are taking immense strides in placing our country in the position of Great Britain, and even worse."

In Europe, as in America, the freeholder is victimised. In France, in Germany, in Russia, the Land Mortgage Banks are already pressing on the peasantry with something like the vigour of the *ancien régime*. In India, the soucar, schroff, bania, or mahajun drains the last drop of the poor ryot's blood. He is virtually a serf. In a word, wherever Free Trade in Land has fairly run its course it has been a ghastly failure. It has at one end the money-lender, and at the latter the Bonanza Farm.

Let us have neither. Let us pass direct from feudalism to municipalisation; vest the site of every town in its Town Council, and of every parish in its Parish Council. The land is the birthright of the people. The Free Land Leaguers are trying to hand it over to the capitalists. If they succeed in gulling the electors, the little finger of every new landlord will be thicker than his predecessor's loins, and a long era of suffering—the Capitalist era—as fatal as that inaugurated by the Norman Conquest, will be the result.

Nota Bene.—The first man who, having enclosed a plot of ground, took upon himself to say "This is mine!" and found people silly enough to believe him, was the real founder of Civil Society. How many crimes, how many wars, how many murders, how much misery would have been spared the human race, if some one, tearing up the fence and filling in the ditch, had cried out to his fellows, "Give no heed to this impostor; you are lost if you forget that the produce belongs to all, the land to none."

J. MORRISON DAVIDSON.

All who are willing to aid in circulating this and similar leaflets on the Land Question, are earnestly requested to communicate with Mr. FREDK. VERINDER, Secretary of the ENGLISH LAND RESTORATION LEAGUE 8 Duke Street, Adelphi, London, W.C., from whom all information may be obtained.