

From Serfdom to Wagedom.

The fall of the decadent Roman empire marked the dawn of a new era. For thousands of years chattel slavery had been the only form of slavery. In endless rotation civilizations founded upon that basis had succeeded one another. But now at last conditions were ripe for a change for which these cycles of chattel slavery had been but a preparation.

The drying out of the uplands of Asia displaced the population of that continent, and a great westward migration commenced. Goth, Frank, Vandal and Hun swept wave on wave across Europe. Before the inrush of these rude barbarians, Rome, already tottering, could not stand. Gnawing at her vitals was the old disease common to all slave civilizations, "where wealth accumulates and men decay." The wealth of Rome had concentrated into the hands of a very small percentage of her population. The number of slaves was great out of all proportion to the masters, their productivity beyond even the wasting capacity of the dissolute Roman patricians. Roman society had reached the brink of destruction. The barbarians had but to push it over.

The Institution of Feudalism.

Western Europe formerly one great forest had now become populous. The incoming races amalgamated with the former inhabitants who had under Roman rule been reduced to some semblance of order. Conditions became so settled that it was no longer easy for a slave to escape. It was no longer necessary to own and guard him. Therefore gradually a new system of slavery evolved. The slave was attached to the land. He became a serf. His master was now the owner of the land, the lord. The serf toiled on his lord's land producing wealth for him. In return for which he was permitted to toil in his own behalf upon a piece of land set apart for that purpose. The wealth he thus produced was just sufficient to meet his necessities so that he might continue to live and produce more wealth for his lord.

The difference between the chattel slave and the serf is more one of form than of reality. Each produced the wealth that maintained both himself and his master. Each received of that wealth only sufficient, at the best, to maintain him in good working condition. While the chattel slave, being generally bought, represented so much cash laid out and was therefore worth taking a certain amount of care of, the personal welfare of the serf was a matter of little concern to the lord beyond that it was to the lord's interest to protect him from other robbers in order that he