

THE WEEK.

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CONTENTS OF CURRENT NUMBER.

CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES—		PAGE
Agrarian Socialism and Peasant Proprietorship	Goldwin Smith	211
Government and the C. P. R. Monopoly		212
Governmental Paralysis at Washington	B.	212
The London Riots		213
PARTIES IN THE ESTABLISHED CHURCH OF ENGLAND		214
CORRESPONDENCE		215
TOPICS OF THE WEEK—		
The Cost of the Rebellion		216
The Opening Parliamentary Skirmish		216
The Paracellites and the Canadian Press		216
The Fisheries Question		216
The Senate and the President		216
Industrial Distress in England		217
Responsibility for the London Riots		217
Cross Purposes in the British Cabinet		217
The Error of English Royalty		217
M. Aksakoff		217
The Danish Constitutional Crisis		218
NOTES		218
POETRY—		
Nobody—Somebody (Selected)		219
Years' Changes	Ferrars.	219
TECUMSEH—A DRAMA	W. D. LeSueur.	219
MUSIC		220
OUR LIBRARY TABLE		221
LITERARY GOSSIP		222

AGRARIAN SOCIALISM AND PEASANT PROPRIETORSHIP.

In respect to the Land Question, the cases of Ireland and England are peculiar, and can afford no ground for general conclusions on the subject of property in land. Ireland has, in the first place, suffered from the Absenteeism of landlords, which, if its economical effects have been over-rated, has socially been the bane of the country; and, in the second place, from the abnormal raising of rents by the desperate competition for land among an overcrowded population. Ireland and England alike have suffered from the retention of feudal laws and customs respecting succession to real estate, which have led to the undue aggregation of land in the hands of a few great owners, and which the Gracchus of the Irish Land Act has strangely enough allowed to remain in existence by the side of his agrarian legislation. We have nothing in this country answering to these grievances, and as the Torrens system is in course of adoption among us, we shall soon have nothing answering to the cumbrous and expensive conveyancing which in the Mother Country is practically almost as great a bar to the division of estates and the existence of small properties as primogeniture and entail. We have a numerous landed proprietary, and to this, combined with other causes, we owe it that ours is now the conservative side of the Atlantic. Yet the ashes of the British eruption have been wafted over to us; and agrarian fancies are beginning to take hold of some minds which have been prepared for their reception by imperfect education and industrial discontent. A correspondent of one of our leading journals the other day complained that he was paying a higher rent than he could afford for his house, which was near Toronto, and suggested the expediency of legislation which would compel landlords to reduce their rents. It did not occur to him that he might take a house at a lower rent in a less expensive situation; nor did he seem to have asked himself whether the landlord was receiving more than a fair interest on the money which he had laid out, or, if legislative spoliation of landlords commenced, what would be the effect upon the investment of capital in houses, and consequently upon our house accommodation.

The land is the dwelling-place of the nation, and of course nobody can be allowed to spoil it. But it is difficult to see what temptation to spoil it any holder of real estate can have. Under the British system too much land has perhaps been devoted to parks and pleasure grounds, though, as beauty and salubrity are valuable to the inhabitants of a country generally, it is doubtful whether by driving the plough over every park in England, as Mr. Labouchere, Mr. Joseph Arch, and Mr. Bradlaugh propose, the happiness of the nation would be much increased. Otherwise property in land stands upon exactly the same footing as property of any other kind. Equally with property of any other kind, it has in its favour the testimony, at once independent and unanimous, of civilized nations, all of which have adopted, and the more definitively the further they advanced in civilization, the system of private ownership in preference to that common

ownership which prevailed among primeval men, and of which traces still linger in half-barbarous communities such as Russia, India, and Afghanistan. Equally with property of any other kind, it is indispensable as a motive to production, which would cease if the husbandman were not allowed to reap where he had sown, and if private capital could never be invested in the improvement of the land. That they are in danger of destroying the motive power of production, and thus producing famine instead of felicity, does not seem to enter the minds of the Agrarian Socialists. Yet they have had a tremendous lesson on this subject. France at the time of the Revolution was thrown into the hands of men who were the moral counterparts of the Communistic Agitators and Labour Demagogues of the present day. These men wrought their perfect will; they destroyed, by fiscal rapine and sweeping confiscations, the security of all property; and the result was that the farmer refused to till the soil, production ceased, there ensued a national famine of which multitudes died, and at last the nation in despair sought, by an overwhelming vote, the restoration of order and property at the hand of a military despot.

Land, we are told by the Agrarian Communists, ought not to be appropriated, because it is the gift of Providence to the people, not the product of individual labour. Precisely the same may be said of the raw materials and the natural forces which enter into any other production. Stone, wool, water power, or the power of steam, are all as much the gifts of Providence as the soil, nor is the labour which works them into the house, the bale of cloth, or the engine, more individual than that which is expended in the cultivation of land. Investment in land has been recognized and is guaranteed by the law of every civilized State just as emphatically as investment in goods or stocks. Rent, which Agrarianism depicts as something portentously criminal, is nothing more than the hire of land, or rather of the results of the labour and capital by which the land has been reclaimed and made fruitful; nor is there anything more invidious in taking rent for the farm which a man or his father has tilled than in taking hire for the ship which he has built, or for the horse which he has bred. Rapine once let loose cannot be arrested at the line of landed property; it will go on—proof has already been given that it is actually going on—from land to houses built upon land; nor is there any logical limit to its progress. The owner of goods or of stocks need not think that by throwing the landowner's head to Socialism he will save his own. Of the wealth of the community the bulk is traceable to the products of land, which must fall under the same law as the land itself. Nor would the portion of land to which, according to the Agrarians, every child born into the world is entitled be of the slightest use without the capital and tools necessary for cultivation. Mr. Chamberlain, who, being himself the owner of a great commercial fortune, cultivates popularity by inciting to the plunder of landowners, is frankly warned by Socialists that he must not expect to preserve his own house from looting by setting the mob of economical freebooters against the house of his neighbour. His own wealth is just as obnoxious and criminal in the eyes of Mr. Hyndman as that of the man of acres. If landed property is distributed unequally, and not in just proportion to industry, it here again only shares the general defect and reproach. The social organism, like the organism of the body, like everything that we see in the universe, is full of imperfections, or what appear imperfections to us who are ignorant of the grand design. When the eye sweeps over long reaches of the stream of time, improvement is discernible in the distribution of wealth as in other respects; it is clearly discernible in the passage of the race from the Old to the New World; and its pace, as the statistics of wages and of ownership clearly show, has been greatly accelerated of late years. But the social organism cannot, any more than the bodily organism, be suddenly transformed, though it may be torn and tortured by socialistic violence. Such is the moral of violent revolutions, by which none have suffered more than those in whose interest they were made. Any convulsion which disorganizes trade must be felt with the greatest severity by those who depend on daily wages for their bread.

The cry in England is now for creating by main force a body of peasant proprietors. The scheme would deserve rather more serious attention if it were propounded by disinterested economists and not by demagogues in quest of the peasants' vote. It is obvious that it can confer what is imagined to be the special bliss of landowning only on a very limited number of people; not even Mr. Jesse Collings would propose to take the factory operative from the loom and the mariner from the ship and to turn them