

The Rights of Man

By HENRY GEORGE.

NOTE:—This article is a chapter from "Social Problems" published by the great economist in 1883. It is an analysis of conditions in England, the greatest of nations, where exist the greatest extremes of wealth and poverty. Mr. George shows the effect of the land policy in producing such conditions, and points out that in United States the same system is producing like conditions. Whether or not we agree with the conclusions drawn in this article it must be admitted that Henry George was the greatest economist of the past century and has influenced the public mind more than any other economic investigator. Those who contend that Free Trade in Great Britain has conduced to poverty should well consider the arguments set forth here.—Editor.

There are those who, when it suits their purpose, say that there are no natural rights, but that all rights spring from the grant of the sovereign power. It were waste of time to argue with such persons. There are some facts so obvious as to be beyond the necessity of argument. And one of these facts, attested by universal consciousness, is that there are rights as between man and man which existed before the formation of government, and which continue to exist in spite of the abuse of government; that there is a higher law than any human law—to wit, the law of the Creator, impressed upon and revealed through nature, which is before and above human laws, and upon conformity to which all human laws must depend for their validity. To deny this is to assert that there is no standard whatever by which the rightfulness or wrongfulness of laws and institutions can be measured; to assert that there can be no actions in themselves and none in themselves wrong; to assert that an edict which commanded mothers to kill their children should receive the same respect as a law prohibiting infanticide.

Only True Basis

These natural rights, this higher law, form the only true and same basis for social organization. Just as, if we would construct a successful machine, we must conform to the physical laws, such as the law of gravitation, the law of combustion, the law of expansion, etc.; just as, if we would maintain bodily health, we must conform to the laws of physiology; so, if we would have peaceful and healthful social state, we must conform our institutions to the great moral laws—laws to which we are absolutely subject and which are as much above our control as are the laws of matter and of motion. And as, when we find that a machine will not work, we infer that, in its construction, some law of physics has been ignored or defied, so when we find some social disease and political evils we may infer that in the organization of society, moral law has been defied and the natural rights of man have been ignored.

Natural Rights of Man

These natural rights of man are thus set forth in the American Declaration of Independence as the basis upon which alone legitimate government can rest:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident—that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that when any form of government becomes destructive of these ends it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundations on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as shall seem to them most likely to effect their safety and happiness."

So does the preamble to the constitution of the United States appeal to the same principles:

"We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our pos-

terity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

And so, too, is the same fundamental and self-evident truth set forth in that great Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens, issued by the National Assembly of France in 1789:

"The representatives of the people of France, formed into a National Assembly, considering that ignorance, neglect or contempt of human rights are the sole causes of public misfortunes and corruptions of government, have resolved to set forth, in a solemn declaration these natural, imprescriptible and inalienable rights (and do) recognize and declare in the presence of the Supreme Being and

of the courage of their convictions, come to the front, and another thing for the people just emerging from the night of ignorance and superstition, and enslaved by habits of thought formed by injustice and oppression, to adhere to and carry them out. The French people have not been true to these principles, nor yet, with far greater advantages, have we. And so, though the ancient regime, with its blasphemy of "right divine," its Bastille and its "lettres de cachet," has been abolished in France; there have come red terror and white terror, Anarchy masquerading as Freedom, and Imperialism deriving its sanction from universal suffrage, culminating in such a poor thing as the French Republic of

signed the Declaration of Independence, applauded the Declaration of Independence, men who year after year read it, heard it and honored it, did so without thinking that the external principles of right which it invoked condemned the existence of negro slavery as well as the tyranny of George Third. And many, who, awakening to the fuller truth, asserted the inalienable rights of man against chattel slavery, did not see that these rights involved far more than the denial of property in human flesh and blood; and as vainly imagined that they had fully asserted them. When chattel slaves had been emancipated and given the suffrage, as their fathers vainly imagined they had fully asserted them when they threw off allegiance to the English king and established here a democratic republic.

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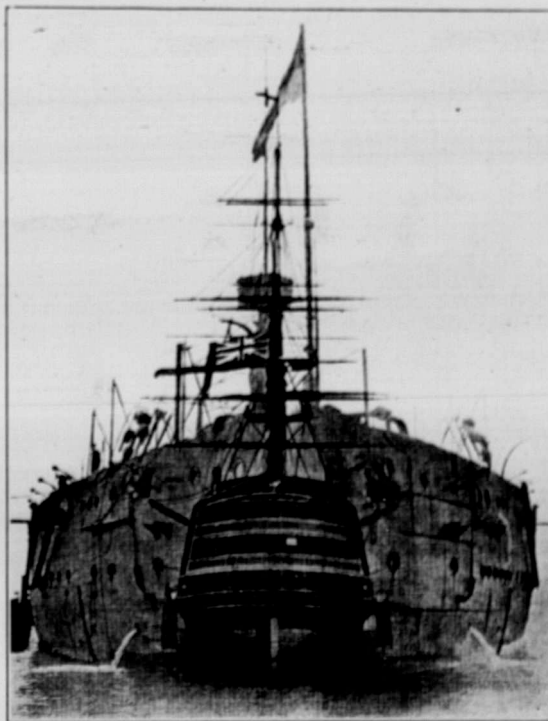
The common belief of Americans of today is that among us the equal and inalienable rights of man are now all acknowledged, while as for poverty, crime, low wages, "over production," political corruption, and so on, they are to be referred to the nature of things—that is to say, if any one presses for a more defining answer, they exist because it is the will of God, the Creator, that they should exist. Yet I believe that these evils are demonstrably due to our failure fully to acknowledge the equal and inalienable rights with which, as asserted as a self-evident truth by the Declaration of Independence, all men have been endowed by God, their Creator. I believe the National Assembly of France was right when, a century ago, inspired by the same spirit that gave us political freedom, they declared that the great cause of political misfortunes and corruptions of government is ignorance, neglect or contempt of human rights. And just as the famine which was then decimating France, the bankruptcy and corruption of her government, the brutish degradation of her working classes and the demoralization of her aristocracy, were directly traceable to the denial of the equal, natural and imprescriptible rights of men, so now the social and political problems which menace the American republic in common with the whole civilized world, spring from the same cause.

Natural Rights Denied

Let us consider the matter. The equal, natural and inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, does it not involve the right of each to the free use of his powers, in making a living for himself and his family, limited only by the equal right of all others? Does it not require that each shall be free to make, to save and to enjoy what wealth he may, without interference with the equal rights of others; that no one shall be compelled to give forced labor to another, or to yield up his earnings to another; that no one shall be permitted to extort from another labor or earnings? All this goes without saying. Any recognition of the equal right to life and liberty which would deny the right to property—the right of a man to his labor and the full fruits of his labor—would be mockery. But that is just what we do. Our so-called recognition of the equal and natural rights of man is to large classes of people but a mockery, and, as social pressure increases, is becoming a more bitter mockery to larger classes, because our institutions fail to secure the rights of men to their labor and the fruits of their labor.

That this denial of a primary human

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"THE LARGEST WARSHIP AFLOAT AND THE OLDEST WARSHIP IN COMMISSION. The above most interesting picture, which is composite, illustrates one of the many remarkable developments in warship building which have taken place between 1755 and 1911. It shows the Hercules and Nelson's flagship the Victory. A photograph of each vessel was made, with the camera at a fixed distance. Then the two negatives were printed on the same piece of photographic paper. The Victory, it will be noted, could be easily stowed away in the Hercules.

with the hope of His blessing and favor, and the following sacred rights of men and of citizens:

"1. Men are born and always continue free and equal in respect of their rights. Civil distinctions, therefore, can be founded on public utility.

"2. The end of all political associations is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man, and these rights are liberty, property, security and resistance of oppression."

Must Carry Out Principles

It is one thing to assert the eternal principles, as they are asserted in times of upheaval, when men of convictions

today. And here, with our virgin soil, with our exemption from foreign complications, and our freedom from powerful and hostile neighbors, all we can show is another poor thing of a Republic with its rings and its houses, its railroad kings controlling sovereign states, its gangrene of corruption eating steadily toward the political heart, its tramps and its strikes, its ostentation of ill-gotten wealth, its children in factories and its women working out their lives for bread!

It is possible for me to see the truth, and assert the truth, and to hear and to repeat, again and again, formulas embodying the truth, without realizing all that that truth involves. Men who