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NEWS FROM NOWHERE:

OR, AN EPOCH OF REST.

BEING SOME CHAPTERS FROM A UTOPIAN ROMANCE.

CHAP. XI.—CONCERNING GOVERNMENT.

“Now,” said I, “I have come to the point of asking questions which I suppose will be dry for you to answer and difficult for you to explain; but I have foreseen for some time past that I must ask them, will I ’nill I. What kind of a government have you? Has republicanism finally triumphed? or have you come to a mere dictatorship, which some persons in the nineteenth century used to prophesy as the ultimate outcome of democracy? Indeed, this last question does not seem so very unreasonable, since you have turned your Parliament House into a dung-market. Or where do you house your present Parliament?”

The old man answered my smile with a hearty laugh, and said: “Well, well, dung is not the worst kind of corruption; fertility may come of that, whereas mere dearth came from the other kind, of which those walls once held the great supporters. Now, dear guest, let me tell you that our present parliament would be hard to house in one place, because the whole people is our parliament.”

“I don’t understand,” said I.

“No, I suppose not,” said he. “I must now shock you by telling you that we have no longer anything which you, a native of another planet, would call a government.”

“I am not so much shocked as you might think,” said I, “as I know something about governments. But tell me how do you manage, and how have you come to this state of things.”

Said he: “It is true that we have to make some arrangements about our affairs, concerning which you can ask presently; and it is also true that everybody does not always agree with the details of these arrangements; but, further, it is true that a man no more needs an elaborate system of government, with its army, navy, and police, to force him to give way to the will of the majority of his equals, than he wants a similar machinery to make him understand that his head and a stone wall cannot occupy the same space at the same moment. Do you want further explanation?”

“Well, yes, I do,” quoth I.

Old Hammond settled himself in his chair with a look of enjoyment which rather alarmed me, and made me dread a scientific disquisition: so I sighed and abided. He said:

“I suppose you know pretty well what the process of government was in the bad old times?”

“I am supposed to know,” said I.

(Hammond) What was the government of those days? Was it really the Parliament or any part of it?

(I) No.

(H.) Was not the Parliament on the one side a kind of watch-committee sitting to see that the interests of the Upper Classes took no hurt; and on the other side a sort of blind to delude the people into supposing that they had some share in the management of their own affairs?

(I) History seems to show us this.

(H.) To what extent did the people manage their own affairs?

(I) I judge from what I have heard that sometimes they forced the Parliament to make a law to legalise some alteration which had already taken place.

(H.) Anything else?

(I) I think not. As I am informed, if the people made any attempt to deal with the cause of their grievances the law stepped in and said, this is sedition, revolt, or what not, and slew or tortured the ringleaders of such attempts.

(H.) If Parliament was not the government then, nor the people either, what was the government?

(I) Can you tell me?

(H.) I think we shall not be far wrong if we say that government was the Law-Courts, backed up by the executive, which handled the brute force that the deluded people allowed them to use for their own purposes; I mean the army, navy, and police.

(I) Reasonable men must needs think you are right.

(H.) Now as to those Law-Courts. Were they places of fair dealing according to the ideas of the day? Had a poor man a good chance of defending his property and person in them?

(I) It is a commonplace that even rich men looked upon a law-suit as a dire misfortune, even if they gained the case; and as for a poor one—why, it was considered a miracle of justice and beneficence if a poor man who had once got into the clutches of the law escaped prison or utter ruin.

(H.) It seems, then, my son, that the government by law-courts and police, which was the real government of the nineteenth century, was not a great success even to the people of that day, living under a class system which proclaimed inequality and poverty as the law of God and the bond which held the world together.

(I) So it seems, indeed.

(H.) And now that all this is changed, and the “rights of property,” which mean the clenching the fist on a piece of goods and crying out to the neighbours, You shan’t have this!—now that all this has disappeared, so utterly that it is no longer possible even to jest upon its absurdity, is such a Government possible?

(I) It is impossible.

(H.) Yes, happily. But for what other purpose than the protection of the rich from the poor, the strong from the weak, did this Government exist?

(I) I have heard that it was said that their office was to defend their own citizens against attack from other countries.

(H.) It was said; but was anyone expected to believe this? For instance, did the English Government defend the English citizen against the French?

(I) So it was said.

(H.) Then if the French had invaded England and conquered it, they would not have allowed the English workmen to live well?

(I, laughing) As far as I can make out, the English masters of the English workmen saw to that: they took from their workmen as much of their livelihood as they dared, because they wanted it for themselves.

(H.) But if the French had conquered, would they not have taken more still from the English workmen?

(I) I do not think so; for in that case the English workmen would have died of starvation; and then the French conquest would have ruined the French, just as if the English horses and cattle had died of underfeeding. So that after all, the English workmen would have been no worse off for the conquest: their French masters could have got no more from them than their English masters did.

(H.) This is true; and we may admit that the pretensions of the government to defend the poor (*i.e.*, the useful) people against other countries come to nothing. But that is but natural; for we have seen already that it was the function of government to protect the rich against the poor. But did not the government defend its rich men against other nations?

(I) I do not remember to have heard that the rich needed defence; because it is said that even when two nations were at war, the rich men of each nation gambled with each other pretty much as usual, and even sold each other weapons wherewith to kill their own countrymen.

(H.) In short, it comes to this, that whereas the so-called government of protection of property by means of the law-courts meant destruction of wealth, this defence of the citizens of one country against those of another country by means of war or the threat of war meant pretty much the same thing.

(I) I cannot deny it.

(H.) Therefore the government really existed for the destruction of wealth?

(I) So it seems. And yet—

(H.) Yet what?

(I) There were many rich people in those times.

(H.) You see the consequences of that fact?

(I) I think I do. But tell me out what they were.

(H.) If the government habitually destroyed wealth, the country must have been poor?

(I) Yes, certainly.

(H.) Yet amidst this poverty the persons for the sake of whom the government existed insisted on being rich whatever might happen?

(I) So it was.

(H.) What *must* happen if in a poor country some people insist on being rich at the expense of the others?

(I) Unutterable poverty for the others. All this misery, then, was caused by the destructive government of which we have been speaking?

(H.) Nay, it would be incorrect to say so. The government itself was but the necessary result of the careless, aimless tyranny of the times; it was but the machinery of tyranny. Now tyranny has come to an end, and we no longer need such machinery; we could not possibly use it since we are free. Therefore in your sense of the word we have no government. Do you understand this now?

(I) Yes, I do. But I will ask you some more questions as to how you as free men manage your affairs.

(H.) With all my heart. Ask away.

WILLIAM MORRIS.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

(This Story began in No. 209, January 11, 1890. Sets of Back Numbers can still be had.)

PRIMITIVE COMMUNISM.¹

I.

"THE man who first enclosed a piece of land and said, *this is mine*, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society," runs the much discussed phrase of the *Discours sur l'inégalité*. Rousseau, therefore, supposes that formerly land was held in common; Hobbes, who, in England and France has exerted so powerful an influence on the formation of modern ideas had previously made the same supposition.

"Nature hath given to each of us an equal right to all things," says Hobbes in *De Cive*. "In a state of nature every man has a right to do and to take whatsoever he pleases, whence the common saying that Nature has given all things to all men, and whence it follows that in a state of nature utility is the rule of right."

This quotation will show Mr. Huxley that Rousseau cannot be charged with having reintroduced into Europe the "State of Nature" of the Greek stoics, whose philosophical doctrine was a protest against the social condition of the age.

The primitive communism of Hobbes and Rousseau was a mental conviction which, probably, they could not have based on any fact duly established. Mr. Huxley, who is not to be put off with mental convictions, exclaims: "The confident assertions that the land was originally held in common by the whole nation are singularly ill-founded." And with equal confidence he asserts that: "Land was held as private or several property, and not as the property of the public or general body of the nation."

Let us see which of the two, the "ignorant" Rousseau or the learned Professor, is in the right; and, in order to that, we must address ourselves to the men who have been in contact with savages and barbarians.

Mr. Huxley, doubtless, has in his library the *De Bello Gallico*. Let him open it at Book VI. § 22, and he will read: "No German possesses enclosed fields of any extent, but the magistrates and the chief distribute the fields to the clans and families who live in common, and the year following compel them to go and settle elsewhere." One of the objects of this custom was "to uphold in the people the sense of equality, since every man sees his resources equal to those of the most powerful." It follows that amongst the Germans known to Cæsar the land was the common property of the entire nation. Elphinstone observed among the Afghan tribes, whom he had to combat, the same mode of possession of the land by the nation at large, and its periodical distribution among the clans and families composing the nation.² Wherever one has been able to go back to the origin, one has met with common property in land.

Morgan in his last and remarkable work on *The Houses and House Life of the American Aborigines* (1881), has collected a large number of examples of this primitive communism. He reproduces the following curious passage by the celebrated Moravian missionary, Heckewelder, who lived with the Indians from 1771 to 1786, and understood their languages:—"The Indians think that the Great Spirit has made the earth, and all that it contains, for the common good of mankind; when he stocked the country and gave them plenty of game, it was not for the good of a few, but of all. Everything is given in common to the sons of men. Whatever liveth on the land, whatever groweth out of the earth, and all that is in the rivers and waters, was given jointly to all, and every one is entitled to his share. Hospitality with them is not a virtue, but a strict duty. . . . They would lie down on an empty stomach rather than have it laid to their charge that they had neglected their duty by not satisfying the wants of the stranger, the sick or the needy . . . because they have a common right to be helped out of the common stock; for if the meat they have been served with was taken from the wood, it was common to all before the hunter took it: if corn and vegetables, it had grown out of the common ground, yet not by the power of man, but by that of the Great Spirit."

G. Catlin who during eight years journeyed among the savage tribes of North America, relates that "every man, woman, or child in Indian

communities is allowed to enter any one's lodge, and even that of the chief of the nation, and eat when they are hungry. . . . Even so can the poorest and most worthless drop of the nation, if he is too lazy to supply himself or to hunt, he can walk into any lodge, and every one will share with him as long as there is anything to eat. He, however, who thus begs when he is able to hunt pays dear for his meat, for he is stigmatized with the disgraceful epithet of poltroon or beggar." These communistic practices, which were once general, were maintained in Lacedæmonia long after the Spartans had issued out of barbarism.

Morgan, who has specially studied the customs of the Iroquois, among whom he dwelt, tells us that they cultivated their fields in common and divided the crops, the game, and fish among the families of the clans. Frequently the division was made per every female head; but the provisions were only, so to speak, given them in keeping, for they were always at the disposal of the community.

The facts collected and related by Cæsar, Elphinstone and Morgan, whose intelligence and powers of observation nobody will think of disputing, confirm the supposition of Rousseau and of Hobbes, which Professor Huxley ridicules in so superior a way. The land has been held in common by the familiar clans of savage nations, and each and all had a right to the provisions, as long as they lasted, procured by the common labour of all the clans.

II.

The primitive communism of the land and its produce established perfect social and political equality among all the members of a nation. The war-chief, on returning to his village loses his power: "he is obeyed by no children save his own," says Volney, and the authority possessed by the magistrate is a purely moral one; chiefs and magistrates were elected by universal suffrage. The woman frequently took a part in the vote, and in deliberations of the council. "The Germans," says Tacitus, "attributed a sacred and prophetic character to them—*sanctum aliquid et providum*." But it was in the distribution of the food at meals that this equality manifested itself. The men and women ate apart. Every Iroquois received from the kettle his portion in a wooden bowl, and as there were neither chairs nor tables in their *long houses*, he ate his food where he pleased. The women and children took their meals after the men. The *syssities*, the common repasts of Greece, are simply a reproduction of those of the Iroquois described by Morgan.

Heraclides of Pontus, the disciple of Plato, has preserved for us a description of the communistic repasts of Creta, where the primitive manners prevailed during a long period of time. At the *andreies* (repasts of men) every adult citizen received an equal share, except the *Archon*, member of the council of the ancients (*geronia*), who received a fourfold portion—one in his quality of simple citizen, another in that of president of the table, and two additional portions for the care of the hall and furniture. All the tables were under the supervision of a matriarch, who distributed the food and ostensibly set aside the choicest bits for the men who had distinguished themselves in the council or on the battlefield. Strangers were served first, even before the archon. A vessel with wine and water was handed round from guest to guest; at the end of the repast it was replenished. Heraclides mentions common repasts of the men only, but Hoeck assumes that in the Dorian cities there were also repasts of women and children. Our knowledge of the constant separation of the sexes among savages and barbarians renders probable the assumption of the learned historian of Creta. Plutarch informs us that at these common repasts no one person was considered as superior to the other, wherefore he styles them aristocratic assemblies (*sunedria aristokratika*). The persons who sat down at the same table were probably members of the same family. In Sparta the members of a *syssitia* were formed into corresponding military divisions, and fought together. Savages and barbarians, accustomed at all times to act in common, in battle always range themselves according to families, clans and tribes.

It was of such imperative necessity that every member of the clan should get his share of the aliments, that in the Greek language the word *moira*, which signifies the portion of a guest at a repast, came to signify Destiny, the supreme Goddess to whom men and gods are alike submitted and who deals out to everyone his portion of existence, just as the matriarch of the Cretan *syssitia* apportioned to each guest his share of food. It should be remarked that in Greek mythology Destiny is personified by women—*Moira*, *Aissa*, and the *Keres*—and that their names signify the portion to which each person is entitled in the division of victuals or spoils.

Primitive Communism, when all men have equal shares, so profoundly implants the sentiment of equality in the breast of the savage, that he cannot conceive that a member of his tribe should be better treated than himself in any way. Darwin relates that having given to a Fuegian savage a woollen blanket, whose qualities he appeared to appreciate, he was surprised to see him tear up the same into strips of equal length and breadth and distribute them to his comrades. The Fuegian was no doubt prompted to this action, which appeared absurd, by a desire to satisfy his own and his companions' sentiment of equality.

In any case, men proceeded after an analogous fashion when they first divided the land. The savage, not knowing how to measure surfaces, divided the fields into narrow strips of equal length and breadth [the agrarian measure of the primitive Romans, the *actus simplex*, was 120 feet long by 4 wide]. The most difficult part of the operation, on account of the irregularities of the ground, consisted in obtaining a straight line, limiting these strips of land of rectangular shape. The straight line alone could satisfy him, and so powerfully was he impressed thereby that the straight line ultimately became the symbol of what was Just; in the same way that the

¹ Condensed from an article entitled "*Rousseau et l'Égalité* réponse au Professeur Huxley" in the *Nouvelle Revue* of March 15, and there signed *Fergus*.

² *Mountstuart Elphinstone*. An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul. 1837. Vol. II., pp. 14 to 22.