

## THE BOON OF NATURE

In former times, when the efforts of man to lift himself by his boot-straps were expended, not upon social enterprises, but upon enterprises in physics and the art of medicine, the reigning idols of desire were the philosopher's stone, the panacea, the fountain of youth, etc. The distinctive mark of this boastful century of ours is likely to be in history that it was the one in which the old delusions and self-deceptions of humanity, driven at last from the domain of physics by the advance of science, retreated to the domain of social phenomena and there entrenched themselves for another attempt to re-attain dominion. Accordingly we hear now about the "Banquet of Life," the "Boon of Nature," the "Patrimony of the Disinherited," and other fine phrases of the same class, all of which take for granted the question of most serious import in the whole range of interest to which they apply, *viz.*, whether there really are any such things.

The question whether man comes into this world provided by nature with an outfit of some kind; whether he finds any endowment awaiting him; whether he is started on the struggle for existence with some chances predetermined in his favor by nature; whether he enters into a natural estate; whether nature fits him out with any natural rights; whether he comes into the world as a man goes to a banquet, which somebody has prepared for him, and to which he goes not by invitation, but of right; whether nature's attitude to him is at all that of boon-giver; whether he is bom to happiness and has

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a right to complain, if he does not have a good time, without regard to his behavior — or whether man has never found in nature anything but a hard-fisted step-mother, who would yield only what was extorted from her; whether he has not had to conquer every good thing which he possesses; whether all rights and liberty are not a product of civilization — these are questions which must be answered by an appeal to history. With the means now at our disposal there can be no doubt as to the answer. We can find no sentiment whatever in nature; that all comes from man. We can find no disposition at all in nature to conform her operations to man's standards, so as to do what is pleasant or advantageous to man rather than anything else. Before the tribunal of nature a man has no more right to life than a rattlesnake; he has no more right to liberty than any wild beast; his right to the pursuit of happiness is nothing but a license to maintain the struggle for existence, if he can find within himself the powers with which to do it. In civilized society the right to live turns into the guarantee that he shall not be murdered by his fellow-men, a right which is a creation of law, order, and civilization, and is guaranteed by nothing less than the stability of the social order as it has been inherited and now is. Liberty is an enlargement of earthly chances for the individual against nature, which has been won by generations of toil and suffering, and which depends upon civilization, as it is the product of it; the right to the pursuit of happiness is nothing but the right to live one's life out in one's own way. Instead of lying back at the origin of society it lies yet a great way in the future, when the present disposition of every one to tell his neighbors how they ought to live shall have been overcome. Probably the primitive savage was happy according

to his standards; but if even it were true that primitive men had and enjoyed some boon of nature, how can it be imagined that a civilized society could get happiness for its members according to the standards of civilized society, while re-establishing any of the facts and conditions of primitive savage life? If we had to go back to the origin of civilization to get the boon, how much would the boon be worth?

In truth there is no boon, and never was. Nothing could well be more contradictory to the facts as they appear than the notion of such a thing.

It is said, of course, that the earth is the boon, that is to say, the "land." The notion which has been caught up is that the land is a gift of nature to all and that some have monopolized it. How many were the "all" to whom it was given? How many are the "some" who have monopolized it? Plainly what is meant and ought to be said is, that the land was given to many and has been monopolized by a few. This is the very opposite of the truth — the earth was given to a few, and civilization has made it available to a large number. Monopoly is in nature, and liberty, or relaxation of monopoly, is one of the triumphs of civilization. The "land" in this connection is a very delusive expression. Every man who stands on the earth's surface excludes every one else from so much of it as he covers; every one who eats a loaf of bread appropriates to himself for the time-being the exclusive use and enjoyment of so many square feet of the earth's surface as were required to raise the wheat; every one who burns wood to warm himself, or uses the fiber of cotton or wool to clothe himself, appropriates in monopoly a part of the land so far as the land is of utility or interest to man. Perhaps the most fundamental fact which makes this world a

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world of toil and self-denial is that two men cannot eat the same loaf of bread. This pitiless and hopeless monopoly is, in the last analysis, the reason for capital and rent, for property and rights, for law and the state, for poverty and inequality.

There are many reasons why it would appear more correct to say that nature gave man to the earth than that she gave the earth to man. If we try to form a notion of the condition of the man who first received the boon in its fresh originality, before anybody had stolen or appropriated it, we find that it was given to him in just the same sense in which it was given to the other animals, only that they had priority and were already in full possession. Man was far superior to them in organization, and he displaced them; but the nearer we get back to the pure boon, the more we find man like the other animals in his mode of existence, his grade of comfort, his standard of happiness, his relation to the "land," and his subjection to nature. If now, we build houses several stories high, so that several men can, in effect, stand on the same square feet of the earth's surface, or if we make the same number of square feet bear two loaves of bread instead of one, we break the monopoly of nature, but we do it by capital and the arts of civilization. Whatever we have, therefore, which is worth having is not a boon of nature, but a conquest of civilization from nature.

If we look at any part of the earth's surface in a state of nature as it is when given to man, instead of finding that it fills any notion of gift or boon, we find that it offers a task of appalling magnitude. It is covered with trees, or stones, or swamps; or hostile animals of various kinds occupy it; or malaria stands guard over it. Between the boon and any use by man stands a series

of obstacles to be overcome; dangerous and toilsome work to be done. It is a chance for the man to maintain the struggle for existence if he is strong enough to conquer obstacles; if not, then he may lie down and die of despair on the face of the boon and not a breeze, or a leaflet, or a sunbeam will vary its due course to help or pity him. This is the only attitude in which we find nature when we come face to face with her in her original attitude toward mankind; it is only when we come to meet her, armed with knowledge, science, and capital, that we force back her limitations and win some wider and easier chances of existence for ourselves.

Robinson Crusoe enjoyed the boon of nature. He climbed to the top of his island and looked about, "monarch of all he surveyed," not a human soul to divide or dispute it with him; but he sank down in despair, thinking himself the most miserable of living creatures, just because he had the boon all to himself and because the maintenance of his existence was such a crushing task. How many men in the United States to-day could maintain their existence each on a square mile of land, in its natural condition, in the temperate zone, if they were cut off from society and civilization?

Only the hardiest and strongest men are now capable of breaking up land in a state of nature, and beginning the reduction of it to human use, even when they have the resources of the arts and capital, and are supported and reinforced all the time by a strong civilized society behind them. There are millions of acres of the "boon" now open to any one who will go to them, and none go but those who are at the same time physically the strongest and socially the worst off of living men. The existing landowners of the United States are represented to be holding, unjustly, exclusive possession of what nature

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has given to us all. But, although in the sixteenth century the whole territory now in this Union stood free and open, entirely unappropriated by white men, yet every one of the numerous attempts that were made to establish settlements of white men here failed. Instead of finding nature holding out a boon which they had only to take, they found her waiting for them with famine, cold, and disease. The settlement at Jamestown barely maintained itself against the hardships and toil of its situation; the Plymouth settlement would not have survived its first winter if the Indians, instead of being hostile, had not given aid. No settlement was established until it was supported by capital and maintained through a period of struggles and first conquest over nature, by reinforcements from a secured and established civilization in the Old World.

There is no boon in nature. All the blessings we enjoy are the fruits of labor, toil, self-denial, and study.