THE HOUSE COMMUNITY IN UPPER ARAGON.

WHEN in 1880 Señor Don Joaquin Costa first described, in his 'Derecho Consuetudinario del Alto Aragón,' the house community existing in that country, and showed it to be identical, or almost identical, with that of the Balkan Slavs, he remarked (p. 65) that it was no advantage to be the chief, or head, of a poor house community, to be the universal heir. Under such conditions, where the children are numerous and the elder generation is not strong, or is past labour, the heir is the slave, first of his brothers, then of his own children, and is master only in the sense of having to satisfy all the claims, external or internal, of the house or house community. Hence renunciations of heirship or of headship of the house were even then not unfrequently heard of. More recently the same writer has described, in three articles contributed first to 'La Derecha,' of Zaragoza, 19, 20, 21 July 1892, and reprinted last December in the 'Boletín de la Institución Libre de Enseñanza,' the rapid aggravation of the situation, under the changed conditions of modern life, the increasing exigencies of the State, and the fall in the price of all agricultural produce. It is evident that the only thing that could make the life of a house community tolerable, with its three generations living together in it, would be concord, and at least to some extent affection among its members. Señor Costa draws a touching picture of how all these have broken down under present conditions. The elders, *laudatores temporis acti*, are ever complaining of the difference between the present times and those when they were young. They lay the fault of the diminished income on the younger generation, instead of on circumstances over which they have no control, but which have made the position of the head of a house community, the *heredero universal*, instead of an enviable situation, one almost intolerable. To all these causes must be added a still more potent one, occasioned by the facility of communications—the knowledge and experience of the higher wages to be earned in towns, of money to be earned there on which no one else has a claim.

Thus it is that a considerable part of the land of Upper Aragon, in which the house community prevails, is falling out of cultivation altogether. The heir, the head of the house, without whose consent no legal change can be made, is away. The charges on the house and property go on accumulating, and the incomings lessen rapidly as the elders, left alone, get less able to work; the price of produce falls; the taxes and fiscal burdens of the state are ever augmenting. The heir is implored to return and take his share in the work and in the burdens, to aid in their removal; or he is asked to consent to the sale of some portion of the land—generally the best, for none other is saleable at all—in order to pay off the most pressing

claims. To this a deaf ear is usually turned ; if the heir consents to sell a portion, the sale proves to be merely a stopgap. Generally he will not answer, or refuses to sell. He reasons thus : If the property be sold now, the proceeds will go either to the elders or to pay off claims and charges ; he will get little or nothing of it. If he waits till the elders die, and the property be sold then, he may get a little ; at any rate he will have the choice to sell or not, he will still have the house. So matters go on ; the land is uncultivated, or not properly cultivated, for want of labourers. At the death of the elder generation it is attempted to be sold ; but no one will now buy land in Upper Aragon, when the produce of cultivation is barely enough to pay the taxation and fiscal charges of the state, and it falls altogether out of cultivation.

Thus we are apparently brought face to face with the disappearance of the last remnants of a once widely spread institution in the Pyrenees. It seems to have been entirely independent of race, to have had no special ethnological relations, to have been simply the product of circumstances and of a certain stage of civilisation. Found in recent times in its purity only in Upper Aragon, there are distinct traces of its existence in former times among the Béarnais of the Vallée d'Aspe.¹ It appears to have existed in the Asturias and in the *Sociedad Gallega*,² and probably the *conseil de famille* of the French code remotely descends from it. As Señor Costa remarks, in its time it has done good service. Its moral effects were excellent. Like the *lar* of the Béarnais, the *avitas hereditaria* of the Basques, the *cinco sueldos* of land, the house and threshing-floor of Navarre, without which no one could be reckoned a *vecino*, it kept land and property from too great subdivision, it checked over-population on a given spot, it fostered family pride and self-respect ; now it seems doomed to extinction. Probably the land which is now falling out of cultivation will again be cultivated in happier times ; but it will be under different conditions and under different institutions. The state may have more to do with it ; but the house community will have disappeared.

The margin of poor land which cannot pay for cultivation under present conditions must increase with the fall in prices and the greater incidence of taxation, and until these conditions are changed the land must gradually fall out of cultivation not only in Upper Aragon, but in all other places where the circumstances are similarly adverse.

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¹ *Osses : Histoire de l'Eglise Réformée de la Vallée d'Aspe*, par Alfred Cadier, p. 67. Paris. 1892.

² *Derecho Consuetudinario del Alto Aragón*, por Joaquín Costa, p. 192. Madrid, 1880.