

"If God Keeps Them Humble"

That "if" seems to be a large one as the sharecroppers and tenant farmers push their campaign for bread and land

By Stanley Milliken

"IF God keeps them humble, I'll keep them poor," was the promise of a Southern cotton planter referring to his colored tenants. The brutal remark is not alien to the South. The planters have enforced both humility and poverty. Now the economic forces at work have carried matters beyond the control of the landlord. As the system of tenancy and sharecropping cracks, the humility of the exploited is also worn thin. The "best minds" of the nation become alarmed. Proposals are made to cure the evils of tenancy. A program will be embarked upon. The best minds will be turning to other matters. But the roots of crisis in the South will not have been dug out. The lightning flare of this planter's brutal remark may suggest the reason why. Let us test its validity for the situation, and then see how the various palliatives stand the test.

Consider the best cotton lands of the South, where no part of the miseries of tenancy can be ascribed to a worn-out or niggardly nature. The Mississippi delta, from above Memphis to the Gulf, has thousands upon thousands of acres of rich alluvial bottomlands capable of yielding nearly four times as much cotton per acre as the average for the rest of the South. Why is it that even of an oasis land like this, Secretary of Agriculture Wallace could rightly say, "I have never seen among the peasantry of Europe poverty so abject as that which exists in this favorable cotton year in the great cotton states from Arkansas on to the East Coast"?

The Civil War "freed" the slave from the old relationship to his means of subsistence, the soil. A new relationship was evolved that bound him quite as effectively as before. It took the form that called for the least cash outlay on the landowner's part, a yearly contracting on "shares" of the crop. Like vines choking a young tree, the clutches of credit, of commissaries, of cheating, of oppression and terrorism, sapped the life out of this arrangement. And agricultural crisis, arising out of world economic contradictions, complete the job. It has reached the point where the planter, with the best intentions in the world, *has* to exploit his tenants to make a profit. Then he has to perfect a system of apologetics that takes his thinking out of the realm of the rational. He talks kindly to "his" croppers, they smile back at him, and he is ready to tell the world that all is well with the system because "his niggers" are happy. Whatever is poor in their condition he attributes to their natural limitations. Whatever is tolerable, he attributes to his own generosity.

"Before the Civil War," a county agricultural agent told me, "if a nigger was lazy, you hit him on the back; now you hit him in the stomach." And to elucidate, he added, "a hound hunts best on an empty stomach." How do you hit him in the stomach? The delta Negro has a jingle which goes: "A word and a word, a figger and a figger—it's all for the white man, an' none for the nigger." Or he will say, "Deducks done got me," meaning that he might have made something on his crop if the boss-man hadn't "deducted" so much for various advances, say eighteen dollars a month for seven months for "furnish" during growing season, fertilizer costs, from 20 percent to 30 percent for interest charges, and perhaps the costs of a midwife's services, a baby's burial, or both.

What happens if the cropper resents his landlord's bookkeeping, and does not smile back? This recital is typical, taken verbatim from a study of social conditions in the area: "I can't find no farm. The last place I was, we had a little falling out and these folks won't rent me nothing now. The old man I was with just baffled me out of my living, and me and him had it out one day. Then I had to leave, and come to town. I been here three years, and won't nobody let me farm."

MANY FIGURES on the average cropper's unbelievable poverty have come out of recent tenancy-committee reports. The wage worker in cotton averaged \$180 income a year, with no garden to supplement his living. The cropper's income figure might be \$284, as in one study covering eastern Arkansas. But not all this in cash; first subtract about eighteen dollars a month for six or seven months, charged against his "settlement" for the "furnish" that kept his family alive during growing months. (And remember that the eighteen dollars doubtless bought less than fifteen dollars worth of necessities if estimated in northern store prices.) Then subtract about fifty dollars for the estimated rent of a two-room shack falling to pieces. Then another sixty dollars for estimated value of home-grown products (corn, pork, etc.). Then another small amount for incidentals, sickness, etc. And finally another 20 to 30 percent of this total for credit charges. Few croppers are handed as much as \$100 at "settlement." Little wonder that by planting time, with a few cheap clothes bought, the cropper is back to borrowing.

The essential phrase to characterize the plight of the sharecropping system is "vicious

circle." We have noted the circle of credit driving the tenant back again and again hopelessly into a contract which often finds him at the end of a year owing his landlord for the privilege of having worked a year for him (with family labor thrown in for good measure).

Let us note other examples. The single cash crop is the bane of the South, we are told. But the "share contract" impels the tenant to produce all the cash crop he can, so as to obtain more in his share. But his share is limited to what he and his family can economically handle. Half of the proceeds at best would barely feed the family. Debt and cheating cut in on this, which leads in turn to an even greater emphasis on the cash crop, in the effort to get out from under the debt.

As a corollary to the evils of the single cash crop, we are told that croppers do not produce enough of their own food. But the planters' commissaries make profits selling food to these workers. Some landlords have even boasted that they made more from their commissaries than from their crop transactions. Can we expect that the planter will encourage home gardens, which take time away from the main profit drive? A true story was told me of a cropper in Arkansas who planted some corn for himself between the rows of cotton. After he had harvested this corn, he was arrested by his landlord, and charged with stealing it. The bewildered cropper was released, but found that his settlement account at the end of the year was charged \$22.40 for court costs.

The great bulk of the sharecropper's income is spent on the poorest of foods. One third of his income goes for meal and flour; 27 percent goes for lard and "fatback," his only meat; grits, sorghum, flour gravy, and gristly "fatback" are his diet. Yet landlords do not customarily attribute the "laziness" of their tenants to malnutrition. The marvel is that he has the energy to work at all.

THE FOLLOWING recital, quoted in Lewis Wade Jones's *Social Study of Tenant Farmers*, permits a glimpse of privation that Americans have thought could exist only in Chinese famines (yet being in the center of a "rich" country, the Red Cross was not needed): "Yesterday Mr. Minor, the boss-man, come through the field and asked me how I felt. I just stopped my hoeing and said, 'Mr. Minor, I just don't know how I feel.' He says, 'What's the trouble, Julia, don't you feel well?' I say, 'I'm just hungry,



William Hernandez

Organizing Sharecroppers

Mr. Minor.' 'Ain't you got nothing to eat at your house, Julia?' 'I ain't got nothing but fatback and corn bread, and I done eat that so long I believes I got the pellagacy, Mr. Minor.' His face turn red when I say that and he said, 'Well, Sat'day I'm going to give you some flour, too; just come by the office.'

Or consider the "vicious circle" if the tenant is ambitious to climb the agricultural ladder. Let him save money under a "good" landlord, even through lean years of agricultural crisis. Then can he buy land? If he wants enough of the rich delta land to farm economically as an independent, he must mortgage himself to the ears. The first ill wind topples him back. The death of a mule is enough, perhaps. But he might, neighbors willing, obtain "hill county" land, many more acres for much less. He will keep scratching the soil for a time, then its sterility will force him out, back to seek another cropper contract. In the cotton South, the agricultural ladder might better be called the agricultural squirrel cage.

Or trace another orbit of the enmeshing

circle. The tenant, says his landlord, needs strict supervision and control because he is just like an animal, ignorant, illiterate, and irresponsible. Yet responsible traits, being akin to independent traits, are discouraged. You will be informed that "education ruins the tenant," makes him "uppity," makes him "forget his place." The naïveté of tenants is a prerequisite of the system.

Schools assist in preserving the system by not educating. Often broken-down country churches are used, without desks, light, heat, or teaching paraphernalia. The state of Mississippi spends eight times as much to educate a white child in a year as it does to teach a colored child. Negro teachers get as little as \$25 a month. Schools are closed during "chopping" (hoeing, weeding) and picking seasons. The children, often no higher than the cotton rows, work alongside their parents from "kin to cain't." Four months schooling a year is all the colored child is guaranteed, and by twelve or fourteen he has left off school for good. Is it conceivable that the South would use good money, even if Uncle Sam provided it, to give the cropper's child a real education

now? About as likely as that every public school in the country would introduce elementary Marxism into the curriculum.

And here's one more vicious circle, akin to the problem facing our national economy. Southern farm workers lack effective (money) demand for clothing made of the very crop they grow at the cabin doors. They lack underwear, tablecloths, sheets; often shirts and dresses are made of old floursacks, and overalls are patched beyond belief. If they were given enough to enable them to buy back in finished goods their share of the cotton they produce, perhaps the country might discover a shortage instead of the perennial surplus which "crop control" is to remedy. When the A.A.A. cotton payments bailed out the planters from their debt prison (they kept nine-tenths), and as surely squeezed an estimated quarter of a million tenants off the land, an opportunity was afforded some shrewd landlords to shift from the share-contracts over to the wage-hand system. In this system, the worker has no claim to "furnish" during the months when his work is not required (about 120 days' labor is needed for a cotton crop);

during this time, the planter could leave his worker to shift for himself. But what a hue and cry for workers during the busy picking season! Then we learned that the \$21 a month "relief" onto which some of the dispossessed had been forced was "demoralizing the Negro." In Arkansas delta counties, the wage-labor category jumped nearly 25 percent in the five years between 1930 and 1935. As one worker said, they had "swapped the devil for a witch."

This tendency to shift to wage labor is allied to the drive of industrialization which is threatening the last feudalistic strongholds in the South. And it is allied to the mechanization of farming, and the prospect of the cotton picker coming to do the work of a hundred human hands. The level Southwest will drive cotton production costs down to a point at which the planter in the Deep South will be hard put to it to compete even if his tenants starve humbly.

How, in the light of all this, can remedial proposals be brought forward with the comment that they "will hurt no one?" Did the taking away of slaves from the South hurt no one? Will the idealistic program not be thwarted, as the dream of emancipation was? Will tenants really be removed from the control of landlords without "hurting" the latter?

"Caution" and "experiment" are the watchwords. Perhaps in a couple of hundred years things will be straightened out. And while this is hurting no one, all the hurts that study has revealed are forgotten. Present resettlement

cannot pretend to solve the cruel problem of rehabilitation for the landless cotton worker. Few are chosen, turnover is high, management arbitrary and inept. Government cheques have been delayed, and Uncle Sam's tenants have nearly starved, or been thrown back to the same old credit sharks.

In the last couple of years, those who dared hope for improvement in conditions moved into battle behind the Bankhead-Jones proposals. But they might have smelled a rat when even the landlords were being sold the idea. Wasn't it a unique opportunity to unload surplus lands onto the government at juicy prices? And to complete the irony behind this pink pill for pallid economy, Secretary Wallace had only to point out that the fifty million dollars a year suggested would not arrest a third of the yearly drop of forty thousand into tenancy, much less cure the present ills.

No amounts are specified in the latest proposals of the President's Tenancy Committee. (One real tenant representative was finally admitted to this committee. Before that happened, the complaint of Gardner Jackson, of the Washington Committee to Aid Agricultural Workers, that no actual croppers or tenants were on the tenancy committee, was answered by a county agent in this way: "Would you put a chicken on a Poultry Board?")

The Farm Security Administration and Corporation, which would buy lands to place tenants in a position to own them after forty years, would be placed under the Department of Agriculture. In the past, the interests of the upper farmers has admittedly preoccupied this department. Can we expect a change of heart? If Washington changes, can we expect

the local staffs, county agents, etc., to renounce their social ties with landlords, and embark on a program that cuts the ground out from under the landlord's accustomed life? This work should be under the Labor Department, and tenants should be proportionately represented on all boards affecting their interests. But do you think this form of a democracy will obtain in the Democratic South?

Recommendations of the minority report of this committee reveal weaknesses in the main report. Health and education proposals are too vague to have meaning. The Wagner Labor Relations Act should cover the cotton-farming South, and social security should be made available. And there is the matter of really extending the vote to all, regardless of race or politics.

COOPERATIVES must be the ultimate weapons of competition of the freed tenant against the landlord's large-scale operations and combines. But proposals to dive directly into government-sponsored coöperative cotton plantations will meet with objection from every side except the theorists of liberal bent. Even the tenant is "land hungry."

A more feasible suggestion is put forward by the Farmers' Union. Instead of financing (at around \$4000 a family) the buying of land toward ownership, give eight times as many croppers the equipment needed to set them up as renters, meanwhile affording supplementary credit and other facilities, as well as the advice and supervision necessary.

This is not to say that coöperatives are not to be aided. The most heartening sight in the South is the pioneer drive of members of the Delta Coöperative in Mississippi, building a little new world which, as one of them said, he wouldn't swap "for the whole damn state of Arkansas." But not enough coöperatives could be built to answer that imperative *now* of Roosevelt's recent speech. The opposition to coöperatives is bound to be greater than to any other proffered solution. Others must first be pushed.

Among these, a powerful set of proposals is to be cast in the form of a bill by the Farm Holiday Association. A five-hundred-million dollar appropriation for the first year is to be among its provisions. Interest on loans to carry out the detailed program will be set at the low figure of 1½ percent. It will be the only answer at all commensurate with the problem which official surveys have posed so starkly and answered so tamely.

We who wish to fight back the encroachments of fascism abroad must recognize a parallel here in our cotton South. Not alone in the measures to defend civil liberties, but also in the struggle toward sweeping change, we confront a fascistic pressure. Just as Europe's democracies defer to fascist bravado, so too will our liberally gesturing national figures finally defer to the "rights" of the landed interests in the South—unless we back the militant agricultural unions, and fight with them to put real teeth into tenancy proposals now that the issue is hot.



Joseph Serrano

"He hasn't eaten all day. He's trying to get a radical slant on things."

READERS' FORUM

An open letter to John Haynes Holmes—On "straight" art—The Puerto Rico murders

● SIR: I address myself to you because you have often, in time of stress, stood more firmly than many others of your calling and your liberalism upon grounds of principle and verifiable fact. Also because you have yourself written: "My years of experience in observing cataclysmic events, and in successfully training myself to sift evidence, analyze reports, recognize facts, and detect propaganda, must have taught me something about the nature of truth and error in times that try men's souls." Why, then, did you, in a recent "symposium" about the Moscow trial of Piatakov, Radek, and the others, write: "If the defendants were guilty, then is the whole early revolution utterly discredited. If the men are innocent, then is the Stalin regime discredited. It is a perfect and complete tragedy, whatever way you look at it." Is it not too easy, Sir, to avoid the arduous task of decision and content yourself with the facile dictum that, in any event, the greatest social revolution in history to date is discredited?

Allow me to ask: *Does the fact that Judas betrayed Christ discredit Christianity?* Does the fact that Benedict Arnold betrayed the American Revolution discredit the Washington regime, or the American Revolution? Does the fact that Mussolini was once a Socialist discredit the underground mass movement in Italy? Does the fact that Pilsudski, once a Socialist, once exiled by the czar to Siberia, died as dictator of Poland, discredit the social revolution against the czar, or the Polish revolutionary movement? Does MacDonald's treachery in England discredit the English labor movement?

Does the fact that William Green, who was once an advocate of industrial unionism and of independent political action, now connives with the bosses to split the industrial-union movement in the automobile, steel, and other industries—does that discredit the American labor movement?

And if not, by what right do you charge that the fact that Trotskyists have betrayed the Soviet Union discredits utterly the whole early revolution? Is it not rather true that the guilt of the defendants discredits them alone, and brands them as traitors?

But how could they be traitors? How could Judas, Arnold, Mussolini, and William Green turn traitor? Is the fact that they are traitors to be denied because honorable men find treason so alien to their minds? Is an act to be judged "incredible" because men are naive, and refuse to learn from the innumerable examples of history? Every profound social movement has had its traitors. In vast social upheavals (and which has been more vast than the Russian Revolution?) many men have always fallen by the wayside, traitors. Does that mean that we must shun social revolution because there will be traitors to it?

Marx knew better. Writing about the Paris Commune, he said: "In every revolution, there intrude, at the side of its true agents, men of a different stamp; some of them survivors of and devotees to past revolution, without insight into the present movement, but preserving popular influence by their known honesty and courage, or by sheer force of tradition; others mere bawlers, who by dint of repeating year after year the same set of stereotyped phrases against the government of the day have sneaked into the reputation of revolutionists of the first water. . . . These are an unavoidable evil; with time they are shaken off."

It is necessary to fight traitors, to ferret them out, to expose them. Judas has not made you lose faith in Christianity; why should Trotsky make you lose faith in revolution? Is not one who says that treason discredits the ideal betrayed, himself betraying that ideal? Would you not say that to the cynic in the temple who should throw Judas in your face to deny Christianity? Should we not say that to you?

You closed your statement in that "symposium"

with the sentence: "A government which can do such things, *whether the men be guilty or not*, is not far removed from the Nazis of Germany." Is it not a shameful thing to try to smear the Soviet Union with the filth of Nazism in this sly way? *If the men were guilty they got what they deserved. Honor can dictate no other answer.* You say: "It is a basic principle in our country to believe a man innocent until he has been proved guilty. . . ." And yet you betray that principle when you *assume* the guilt of the Soviet Union, no matter what the facts may show about the guilt of the Trotskyite defendants.

You have spent a lifetime in the fight for peace. It is appalling that you should not recognize in the Moscow trial a great contribution to the cause of peace. The very exposure of the war plots of the Japanese and German governments, plots that were to mature in this very year, helps maintain world peace. Why should you so readily allow yourself to be deceived and swerved from your struggle for peace by the propaganda of Hearst, Trotsky, and the capitalist press, rejecting in the process the judgment of independent observers and journalists present at the trials, as well as the published testimony?

Can you not understand that you cannot be a friend of the Soviet Union, and a friend of peace, if you associate yourself with the enemy of the Soviet Union, the enemy of peace, Leon Trotsky?

MORRIS U. SCHAPPES.

From Artist Ajay

● I wish to take issue with the following statement by Maynard Dixon published in the Readers' Forum of April 6th: "The radical press preaches that the materials and technique of a cartoon should be secondary to its intent. . . . This conviction is fully justified. . . ."

I sincerely doubt that the radical press "preaches" the above doctrine or that it is "fully justified." Technique and intent cannot be separated with impunity, nor made one subordinate to the other. The means, in art, conditions the end and vice versa. If the radical press has appeared relatively satisfied with the eclipsing of technique by intent, then that is rather acquiescence than preaching. If different objectives require different methods of approach, then that, it seems, is adaptation rather than "neglect of the facts of subject matter." Art will not be regimented, nor must technical deviation be confused with "technical hokum." A bee-line may well be the shortest distance between two points, but surely it is not always the most logical and efficacious. I should think the rapier more effective at close quarters than the slapstick.

Let there be no moaning at the bar, Reader Dixon, should it become expedient at times to term a spade a shovel. There's always "Orphan Annie."

ABE AJAY.

The Ponce Massacre

● The following is a translation of a leaflet issued by the Communist Party of Puerto Rico which gives very clearly the sequence of events at Ponce [see "Murder in Holy Week," New MASSES, April 6, 1937].

"We, the people of Puerto Rico, accuse Governor

Winship of conspiracy to overthrow the Constitution of the United States by force of arms. We accuse him of responsibility for the cold-blooded murder of eighteen Puerto Ricans and of the wounding of 150 others, including women and children. We charge that the Palm Sunday massacre in Ponce was a deliberately planned murder with no parallel in all of American history.

"When the American patriots of 1775 were assassinated in Boston, the colonies were on the verge of revolution. We were not. The American revolutionists did not have freedom of speech and assembly. 'Constitutionally' we have.

"Then why did Colonel Orbeta [chief of the Insular Police] go to Ponce on the morning of the massacre? Why were the police present with sub-machine guns? Why was the permit rescinded an hour before the killing? There can be only one answer. The government of Governor Winship was plotting murder.

"Who started the shooting? The Nationalists or the police? Let us see. One month ago, when the Nationalists had an island-wide concentration in Caguas, the police requested the mayor to revoke the permit. He refused and told them that 'they would assume all responsibility for what happened.' The parade was held without a single disturbance.

"In Ponce, the mayor gave in to police pressure (read: Winship) and rescinded the permit.

"The following occurred: The Nationalists, with many spectators watching, were assembling to march in spite of the withdrawal of the permit. The police, armed with carbines and sub-machine guns, were posted on both sides of the assemblers. Suddenly one of the marchers gave the command to fall in. Just as suddenly, a policeman fired in the air. This was the signal. Immediately the police raised their weapons and began their murder of unarmed men, women, and children, participants and spectators.

"What is it they wanted? To disperse the marchers? The crowd dispersed; but no, this was not enough. The doctors report that the majority of victims were shot in the back—in other words they shot at fleeing people.

"Our military governor, General Winship, instructed his troops well. 'When the enemy flees—kill them.' But the general does not seem to know the war is over. This is 1937, General. This island has 'constitutional' freedom of speech and assembly. This is neither Italy nor Germany. Or is it?

"Don Pedro Albizu Campos sits in prison now, charged with conspiracy to overthrow the United States government by violence and force of arms, accused of assassination and terrorism.

"We ask: who are the assassins? Who are the conspirators against the constitution? Who are the terrorists? There can be only one answer. Those responsible for these acts are the governor and his police force.

"We, as free citizens of Puerto Rico, demand the removal of that man who is at war with the Puerto Rican people—Governor Winship. We demand the liberation of the political prisoners.

"Forward to a broad people's front of all parties and groups who will not tolerate the massacre of our people! May our slogan be that which the shot Nationalist wrote with his own blood on the pavement just before he died. *Vive la Republica! Abajo los asesinos!* [Down with the assassins!]

"Communist Party of Puerto Rico."

Comrades, with your aid we can achieve those immediate objectives: the removal of Governor Winship, freedom for Albizu Campos and the other political prisoners. Write your protests to President Roosevelt—but write *now*. Let the whole world hear of this unbelievable massacre. With your aid we will accomplish these demands and go forward to complete independence from the real culprit—Yankee imperialism.

WILLIAM ELLIS.



J. D. Egleson