

Agrarian Unrest in the South

COTTON is the single cash crop, and therewith also the chief agricultural export, of the South. Add to this the fact that the supply of cotton is financially controlled not at the centers of exchange, but at the actual source of supply, and you have in sum the essentials of the existing situation. How this situation has come to exist is still an untold story. The end of it all—the fact that financial control has succeeded in fastening itself upon the cotton-producing states of the South—is evident on all sides. There are statistics also, and practical experience besides; these exhibit certain salient features, such as absentee landlordism, the tenant system, and so forth. I shall not attempt to tell the story myself, since there are others much better qualified. Among these is Hon. Joseph T. Holleman, of whom the *Atlanta Constitution* says: "Probably no man is better posted concerning farm conditions in the South."

According to Mr. Holleman the situation has come about in this way: When the Southern soldiers returned to their homes after the Civil War, they had nothing left but their land. Fortunately in every town and village there were a few men who kept up their financial connections with the North. It was these men who saved the situation, by buying goods on credit and selling them out to the farmers again on credit. Under an arrangement of this sort the Southern farmers had to buy everything that they needed, not only seeds and agricultural implements, but also food for themselves and for their negro employees. Naturally the men engaged in this sort of business began themselves to accumulate land, by foreclosure, or by outright purchase. These men are to-day the large landowners and the large cotton producers of the South. "In every county you will find them," Mr. Holleman says. "They own the banks, the fertilizer plants, the oil mills, the warehouses and big supply stores, and all the important lines of business. They sell the farmer his agricultural implements, his fertilizers, his mules; all that he and his laborers wear, and all that he and his laborers eat. They also represent non-residents, who own large tracts of land, and they control these lands and dictate what shall be planted on them. They are also in politics, they are members of the legislature, they are active in all elections, they have candidates for all the county offices, they help elect the mayors of their towns, the solicitors of the city courts, the solicitors general, the county judges, the judges of the superior court, the congressmen, the governors, and the United States Senators."

In this trenchant analysis of the existing situation, Mr. Holleman shows us quite clearly there are three classes concerned: free farmers, tenant farmers, and absentee landlords. As for the first of these, according to our authority, "they are not more disturbed by the war in Europe than they would be by an eruption of the volcano Vesuvius. Nor are they concerned as to whether they can sell their cotton crop. If they get the price they want, they sell it. If not, they pile it up under the oak trees in their front yards and let it stay there." Thus, as Mr. Holleman says, "we need not concern ourselves greatly about the real farmers, the independent farmers of Georgia and the South. They have demonstrated the fact that they can take care of themselves, in good times and in bad times, in times of peace and in times of war." Nevertheless we should concern ourselves seriously about their decline as a class. "There are still such farmers left in Georgia and the South"; but, says Mr. Holleman, "you can count them in each county on your ten fingers." So it is everywhere over the cotton-producing area; even in the state of Texas free farmers are becoming fewer and further between. Altogether, according to Mr. Holleman's estimate, they number possibly 10 per cent of the farming population of the South.

As for the second class, that is increasing so rapidly that from statistics of the United States Census Mr. Holleman shows: "In twenty-seven Georgia counties there are 51,033 farm homes; 34,429 of these farm homes are occupied by tenants, and 16,604 are occupied by owners. In other words, nearly 70 per cent of the farms are occupied by tenants. These are the farms that are producing the cotton." Of the remaining 30 per cent, according to Mr. Holleman's estimate, 10 per cent are occupied by independent farmers; this leaves 20 per cent unaccounted for. These "are occupied by owners that are small farmers who have never reached the point of independence and who follow exactly the same system of farming that is followed by the 70 per cent making up the tenant farmers." Take Texas as an example of the new Southwest. In his preliminary report to the Federal Commission on Industrial Relations, Special Investigator Charles W. Holman asserts: "There are more than 200,000 tenant farmers in Texas." Startling as they seem, these figures are fully corroborated by Commissioner Calvin of this state, who has gathered together the statistics and worked out some calculations on his own account. According to Mr. Calvin, "in 1910 there were all-told 415,838 farms in Texas; of this

number 195,863 were operated by owners and 219,975 by tenants, or 46 per cent by owners and 52.6 per cent by tenants." Assuming that farms operated by tenants have gained since 1910 at the same rate as between 1900 and 1910, Mr. Calvin calculates that on April 15, 1915, they must have outnumbered farms operated by owners by 35,040. Thus taking Georgia and Texas as opposite examples, evidently the tenant farming situation is pretty much the same all over the South.

At one time, in discussing Mexico, President Wilson referred to the down-trodden people of that country as the submerged 85 per cent. "Well," says Mr. Holleman, "we have this submerged class in our own country, but you will notice I have raised the percentage. I put it at 90 per cent. About 10 per cent of our farmers are independent, 20 per cent are small white farmers owning their lands, and 70 per cent are tenant farmers." That these conclusions are in no sense extravagant is evident further from the findings of the Federal Commission. Says Special Investigator Holman on this subject: "The time has come for the people of this government to realize that its land inheritance is slipping away, and that ownership is becoming concentrated into the hands of a limited number of individuals. Moreover, the tendency toward further concentration is evident on all sides. At the same time the tenants who farm the majority of the Southern farms—that constitute over half the farms of the nation—are being reduced to the status of wage laborers. In the Southwest the condition has become particularly acute, with the rapid increase of tenant farmers over home-owning farmers, and an accelerated tendency toward land ownership."

It is this last—the concentration of land ownership in the hands of outsiders, so to speak—that is fundamentally responsible for the existing situation. "If," Mr. Holleman writes, "one of these owners lives too far away to look after renting and to attend to the gathering of the crop and the collection of rent, some local man is an agent for the purpose. This local man is certain to be one of the prominent business men in the city, the town, or the village nearest the farm. This local agent, of course, looks first to making a good rent contract for the owner. When that point is accomplished, then he sees to it that, in some way or other, the handling of all the cotton produced on that farm should come through his store or his bank. He sees to it that all the fertilizers that are bought for this farm, all the mules that are purchased for this farm, all the farming implements that are used on this farm, and all the supplies that go to the tenants on this farm, are handled by him. His only idea is to make the farm produce cotton, and he will attend to everything needed on the farm,

get the rents for the owner, and make a commission, or a sales profit, on everything that is bought for the farm or sold from the farm." As for those that live close at hand, in the cities and towns of the South, they are business men for the most part, "bankers, merchants, owners of oil mills, cotton factories, fertilizer plants," and so on, as Mr. Holleman says, together with "rich lawyers and wealthy physicians, superior court judges, members of Congress, and other classes, whose business training and business enterprises are based solely on cotton. They know that real farming can not be conducted by them." To become real farmers these men would have to "go out in the country, live on the farms, and look after the cultivation of the land, the growing of grain and hay, the raising of live stock. This sort of farming requires constant and intelligent attention. Cotton farming can be done by any sort of a poor white tenant and any sort of a negro. All these poor tenants and negroes need is to have a little direction from town in the spring time, and arrangement by which all they eat, and all their stock eats, is furnished to them. Then they can produce the cotton and carry it into town in the fall, where the lord of the manor will be ready to take it, sell it, pocket the lion's share, and let the poor white tenant and negro tenant have just enough to keep him alive until next year's crop comes in. These men give no thought to the building up of the land, but milk it from year to year of every ounce of cotton it will produce." This being the case, the single-crop system is evidently not the result of shiftlessness on the part of the farmers; on the contrary, the single-crop system appears to be imposed from above by the absentee landlords.

The foregoing statements, based upon observed facts, supported by official figures, and issued in all temperance by those best qualified to speak on the subject, substantiate the conclusions from which I set forth: The cotton crop of this country is controlled, and that too at the source of its supply. Not, as it should be, by the staple growers themselves; nor yet, as it might be, by the federal or state governments concerned; but, as it certainly should not be, by a comparatively small group of individuals composing the so-called cotton oligarchy of the South. The interests of these individuals are not in first instance agricultural, they are fundamentally financial, and, from the standpoint of the staple growers, altogether alien, if not actually foreign in character. Thus in the last analysis the situation seems to resolve itself into a clear-cut issue between financial exploitation on the one hand, and agricultural production on the other. The natural resources of the South are such as to stimulate productive activities, not only along agricultural, but

also along industrial and commercial lines. Under our existing exchange system, however, there is a condition precedent to be considered: in order to undertake productive activities it is necessary to secure capital, cheaply and reasonably withal. Yet the available capital appears to be exclusively controlled, and those in control seem inclined to exploit. Hence the existing deadlock between exploitation and production, resulting in the single-crop system and the financial oppression of the South. Evidently to break this deadlock a twofold campaign is required—a negative campaign against exploitation, and a positive campaign for production.

In Texas both these campaigns are already inaugurated, along what seem to me the correct strategic lines, under the able leadership of Governor Ferguson, or Farmer Jim, as he is popularly known. The first thing necessary in the negative campaign is to disrupt the financial oligarchy; this done, the productive resources of the state will be opened to all the investors of the financial world. Such was the underlying purpose of the Gibson insurance bill, which failed unfortunately in the last legislature. But, as I understand it, the ill-fated Gibson bill was only the first gun in this negative campaign against exploitation; others will soon be fired that will fetch their mark. But suppose, after the oligarchy is disrupted, the exploiters should reorganize their financial forces along national or supernational lines? In such case it would be necessary to bring forward and strengthen the fiscal forces of the state. Governor Colquitt's plan in this connection was to establish a state agricultural bank, which should lend its funds directly to the staple growers against cotton as security. The difficulty is that no single state is strong enough financially even to regulate, much less to control the cotton situation of the entire South. Nor is it necessary for any state to proceed *single-handed*. That is the function of the national government, and the Federal Reserve act explicitly provides for just such a contingency. One of the prime features of this act is to mobilize federal funds and place them where they are most required.

But to proceed against the exploiters is only one part of the proposed campaign. To attack, and even overcome the financial oligarchy, is not of itself enough; it is necessary also to educate and organize the exploited. In Texas particularly, whose population is composed of so many diverse and in some cases discordant elements, it is not enough to relieve the people from the pressure of exploitation; they must be educated also, and organized along productive lines, in order that they may be able to take advantage of their magnificent natural resources. Like the negative campaign against exploitation, this positive campaign for pro-

duction is also inaugurated in Texas, and well on its way under the able administration of Governor Ferguson.* In the first place there is the tenant farmer's plank in the Governor's political platform, which has since become incorporated in the laws of the state. According to this statute no landlord is entitled to more than a third of the cotton or a fourth of the corn, and bonuses are strictly excluded. So the tenant farmer has now at least a chance to succeed. In the second place there are the rural school law and the compulsory educational bill, which not only render it possible, but even make it obligatory for the children of the country districts to attend school. It will be interesting to observe how these laws operate when it comes to cotton-picking times when the children are required in the fields. Then again, diversified farming is not only encouraged, but also materially aided by both state and federal educational agencies; industrial enterprises are already instituted, transportation facilities are being extended throughout the state, and from these commercial expansion is destined to proceed.

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Stephen Crane

WHATEVER is deeply thought is well written, in the view of M. Remy de Gourmont. The observation has an aerial beauty. From its outlook one instinctively casts a revisiting glance of speculation at well written places in expression one had lost awhile, to find how deeply thought they are.

In this speculative glance, not long since, I chanced to be arrested by the memory of Stephen Crane. Endowed with a genius for direct expression, he was able in his short existence to present a surprising number of penetrating ascertainties of American life, with a high degree of clarity and power.

One encounters occasionally a popular conception of Stephen Crane as the author of one or two slight prose tales, and a few lines of grotesque verse—a writer of fragmentary achievement, with a talent of distinct originality, but somewhat narrow. The conception has come into being, doubtless from our widespread custom of asking concerning each subsequent work of an author whether it is just like his first book, and of ignoring the subsequent work if it is not. With many authors this is the only means we have of supporting a certain, correct, traditional attitude of consistent disappointment in their efforts. The prevalence of the attitude is attested by the celebrated response of a veteran editor of *Punch* to a friend's remark that *Punch* wasn't as good as it used to be: "No, it never was."

To interested readers of Stephen Crane's work, no impression of it could be further than the fabular