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EDITORIAL

ROOSEVELT AS SHANGHAIER.

By DANIEL DE LEON

WITH a great bray of trumpets another letter has just issued from the Complete Letter Writer, housed at the Federal Capitol. This time the letter is on the subject of “better social, sanitary and economic conditions on American farms.”

The epistle is addressed to Prof. L.H. Bailey of the New York College of Agriculture. It starts with the startling announcement that “no nation has ever achieved permanent greatness unless this greatness was based on the well-being of the great farmer class;” it then proceeds to sing the praises of the great progress made by that self-same farmer class of America in well-being; and then goes on to state that, this notwithstanding, “the social and economic institutions of the open country are not keeping pace with the development of the Nation as a whole.” In confirmation of this last assertion the opinion is quoted of a physician, “a careful student of farm life,” who declared that “personally, from the health point of view,” he would prefer to see his own daughter, a 9-year-old girl, “at work in a cotton mill rather than have her life as a tenant on the average Southern tenant one-horse farm.”

Of course, the last statements do not tally with the first set. Indeed, the last are correct, and are the cause of the epistle.

By all sociologic tests, the property-holding inhabitants of the “open country” not only are not “keeping pace” with the development of the Nation as a whole, they are going backwards and sinking down. It is not the so-called “backward races” from Europe who congest most of our cities. The largest contingent is furnished by “the great farmer class” and mostly out of the “old native stock.” The causes that lead to this result are the causes that are urging on the overthrow of the capitalist system of iniquity.

Time was when the farm was attractive. In those days there never was any real difficulty in obtaining “farm hands.” Those were the days when the “farm hand” of to-day became the farmer of to-morrow. It was the days that ran parallel with those when the employe, mechanic or servant in the cities could look with confidence to the time when he would be his own master. As those days changed in the cities, they changed also in the “open country,” leaving, however, the “farm hand,” or rural proletarian, in an infinitely worse pickle. Bad, and often even horrible, as the condition of the urban proletarian became, the very crowd in which he found himself furnished him opportunities, on the one hand, to eke out a living somehow, or the other, to assert himself, and thereby mitigate the weight of his chains. In other words, the evils suffered by the urban proletarians were evils of capitalism that came accompanied with certain opportunities for individual assertion that capitalism affords. With the rural proletarian it was and is otherwise. The evils of capitalism did not and do not bring to him any alleviation; on the contrary, they thrust him back into virtually feudal conditions of servitude. Rural magistrates readily assume feudal functions. Not a shadow of “equality before the law” falls to the propertiless in the “open country.” There he is helpless—helpless in the “change of a master”; helpless in the opportunity to turn his hand to a new, or different job; helpless to assert himself politically, or otherwise. The rural jails are old style feudal dungeons. No wonder the “farm hand” fled and flees to the cities for asylum; no wonder the flow of “farm hands” to the “open country” dries up, despite all siren songs to lure it thither.

There is a sort of retribution in capitalist development. The farmer who sought to play the feudal lord soon found himself stranded like a clam at low tide. He was not left merely without serfs in the shape of “farm hands,” he soon found himself rioting in natural opportunities that went to waste for want of the necessary capital to operate them. Railroads and moneylenders rode him as he had ridden the “farm hand.” He tried to bring about the “good old times.” The ignorance in which the press, owned by the identical railroads and money-lenders kept him, encouraged him in the delusion. What followed eclipses all tragedies known. The farmer exploited and crippled himself, his wife, his children in the hopeless attempt to encompass the “good old times.” He sank deeper and deeper into the quagmire.

There is more insanity to the square inch in the “open country” than in the “closed country.” The old sailor’s saying that “he who would go to sea for pleasure would go to hell for pastime,” has been justly adapted to the “open country”—“he who would take up farming for pleasure would travel to hell for pastime” has become a proverb.

The Complete Letter-Writer in Washington is well aware of this. In his epistle to Prof. Bailey he but appears in the role of a shanghaier—trying to shanghai the unwary onto the farmer’s ship, hence singing the praises of the happy life of Captain Farmer, whose progress towards happiness, though rapid, should be made still more rapid by means of committees to promote his “social, sanitary and economic condition.”

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.

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